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SHAFT HAS A BALL
A Bantam Book / published April 1973

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For information address: Bantam Books, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Tidyman, Ernest.
Shaft has a ball.

I. Title.
PZ4.T5588Sm [PS3570.I3] 813'.5'4 73-958

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

SHAFT HAS A BALL

1

Shaft felt like a paper bag full of bruised peaches, soft and squishy, ready to spoil. The sun did it. And three large tumblers of Johnnie Walker Black Label on the rocks. The No Name Bar sat dark and cool behind him, an oasis for the street Arabs of Greenwich Village who escaped the August sun that was now sitting on his forehead. Ho, ho, ho, Little Girl—come sit on Santa's face. His apartment building across the street became a fuzzy white blur.

Shit. Unless he got some sleep or went over to the McBurney Y on Twenty-third Street and sweated the stuff out of his system, the day was wasted. Shit. Then his eyes adjusted to the sun and the vertigo and sudden spasm of drunkenness passed almost as quickly as it had come. He pulled a large lungful of humid air into his well-muscled chest and let it out slowly. August in New York was like breathing through used gym socks, but it was better than not breathing at all or breathing in places like Newark or Cleveland. He swung across the street with the loose, controlled stride of a big man—perfectly proportioned, keenly conditioned—a coffee-brown slab of a man in seersucker slacks and a blue hopsack blazer. He glanced at the sweaty faces of the people he passed, most of them with droplets of sweat worn like beads in glitter-

ing rows, some of them staining their clothes with the dark splotches of perspiration.

Shaft wheeled away from them and headed into his apartment building. He took the three flights of stairs for exercise and haste; sometimes the elevators in Greenwich Village operated sideways. He keyed open his apartment door and stepped in. There was the sudden pleasant chill of the big air conditioner he had lugged home from Korvette's in the back of a cab. There was the slightly piny aroma of an air purifier recently sprayed about, replacing the odor of accumulated cigarette smoke. Sparkling clean ashtrays winked at him. There wasn't one drinking glass ring stain eating into the wood end tables. Even the fine layer of dust on the TV screen was gone. And so was Mrs. Klonsky, his personal Polack, who, like all the Polacks in the world, hated everybody and everything—including Shaft and his apartment—but also hated dust the worst. She was a killer of dust, a blue-eyed, pie-faced, bent-nosed stalker of the stray fleck of the universe.

Shaft moved to the kitchen. Was this where he lived? No Leaning Tower Of Pizza of dirty dishes in the sink, or stuffed paper sacks of trash beside the stove. He watched his step; the floor was so clean and highly waxed a man might slip and break his ass in about nine places. It was overkill and he felt like a man who visits the neighborhood of his youth to discover that it has all changed.

But the note he'd taped to the refrigerator was still there. "IMPORTANT! WEDNESDAY, AUG. 16, 3:30 P.M. WINIFRED GUITERREZ."

His watch gave him ten minutes, maybe a little more because she would probably be late. He had known maybe three broads in his thirty-two years

who had been on time. One was an aunt who lived in Connecticut and traveled a lot by bus, the second a teacher in the fifth grade who was really a cop at heart, and the third the juvenile court judge who made him get his ass into the army to keep it out of jail. But the others . . . always late. No, wait a minute. There was the navy nurse who came around to give him shots and pills in the hospital on Guam. She was on time.

But this Winifred Guiterrez. . . .

Helen Green, the wife of his accountant, had told him about her. "Winnie is not only a pretty girl, John, but a fine person, too. She's intelligent and talented."

"What does she do in her spare time," he groused. "Redecorate bathrooms with Contact Paper?"

When Helen got pissed off at him, he felt suddenly guilty. She was probably as close to being an older sister as he'd ever had.

"All right, smart-ass," Helen said. "Just forget it."

"No, I'll talk with her. You know that. Just tell Marvin not to let the IRS send me to jail while I'm still young."

"All she wants is an interview," Helen said.

"Sure, sure," he ended it.

On the phone, Winifred Guiterrez had a delicious low-key coolness to her voice and he was more sure than ever that she'd turn out to be a dog. So what? He had once blind-dated a telephone operator with a voice he could have taped and sold as instant orgasm. She had a heavier beard than he did and a rear end the size of a portable cement mixer.

Winifred had called him Mr. Shaft and when he told her there could be no pictures, no discussion of the actual cases, she remained cool.

"Of course," she said.

Like a dumdum, he had proceeded to explain it to her, anyhow. In his profession, you couldn't have your picture published. Too many people already knew what he looked like.

She understood again. So, on the phone, she was nice. After they hung up, he went out to get a copy of the black monthly magazine for which she did profiles. Big-name athletes, the movie and stage people, the senators, congressmen, surgeons, big business types, and university deans. Her feature was an intimate, sometimes humorous, always warm peek into the lives of black people in unusual professions. Unusual for *them*, that is.

This month's story was about a young black woman who was a professional trainer of horses; the story gave Shaft a finely cameoed picture of the woman and a lot of behind-the-paddock color.

Now she was going to write about a nice, colorful, black private eye.

The knock on the door came as he tried to think of something to offer her to drink. Shaft glanced at his watch. She'd fooled him. Exactly on time. On the way to the door he glanced at the huge ebony figurine of a clenched fist with upraised middle finger that he'd bought in Mozambique. He moved to it and quickly softened the obscenity by turning the carving on its side. An Arab girl in Morocco had offered to demonstrate its real fun qualities if he wished to watch. It had been interesting, but not all that unusual, only a reminder that there was a sex freak behind almost every door. Including his.

The door. Okay, hello, there Miss . . . it was a cop. A big hulking one with big, meaty shoulders and too much paunch. Face meaty, too, about the color

of tomato aspic, to go with a drinker's peeled-grape eyes.

"Mr. Shaft?" The cop was as surprised as Shaft.

"No. I'm the houseboy," Shaft said. "What that evil old man Shaft do now?"

"What? You're the——? No, no, nothing like that. I just got a message for Mr. Shaft. See that he gets it."

It came in a plain letter-size envelope.

"Captain Anderozzi," the cop said, assuming some of the importance that went with the title.

"You bet. Sure thing," Shaft said. He ripped open the envelope.

"Hey!" the cop said.

"I screen all his mail. He been too drunk to read anything for three months."

"Yeah? Oh."

"An' I ain't so sure he can read sober, either."

The officer was amused and turned away.

"But tell the captain the houseboy said he could go fuck himself," Shaft added, closing the door.

And he could, too.

The big, bulking pile of meat in the blue uniform shuddered all over and went down the stairs.

The note said, "Trying to get you by phone. Call me as soon as you get this. Vic."

Shaft walked to the phone, reminding himself to grumble at Mildred, who was on the board at the We Never Sleep So You Can Answering Service. They were missing calls again. Was there a single answering service in the world that worked?

Shaft dialed with quick flicks of his long, agile brown forefinger. The direct line.

"Yuh?"

"Hello, wop."

"Where are you?"

"Right here. Did Western Union buy your precinct?"

"For Christ's sake, I tried you there and some woman with a foreign accent said you were out getting dirt to bring into the apartment. Who'd you sell to? Bellevue?"

"Correct. The Governor dropped by and we went over to the No Name to hunt up some pussy."

"In the middle of the afternoon?"

"Well, he's nervous. Tax problems. What do you want?"

"Not over the phone. Can you meet me someplace?"

Shaft speculated on the unknown quantity of Miss Guiterrez. "About an hour and a half. Where?"

"Now. It's important."

Shaft heard a sound at the door.

"Mr. Shaft?" The voice was even nicer.

He hung up on Anderozzi, then lifted the phone off the hook, and set it on the table.

Like he said, the captain could go fuck himself.

Her hair was Indian black, with reddish highlights in the straight shininess combed from each side of a center part. He couldn't tell from the front view, but he somehow knew that black silken cascade fell far down her back.

The color of her skin was bronze and copper with a visible glow of health to it. The eyes were almond-shaped without being slanted and widely set, the irises a soft sable swimming in pools of incredible milk white.

Shaft raised a hand and beckoned her inside. He became aware of a hand-loomed Indian cotton print, halter neck, bare back, and front slit skirt in which sleek, coppery legs occasionally appeared as they floated her into the room.

"I'm sorry I interrupted your call," she said.

"I'm not."

A slight curling of the lips at each corner, lips without paint on them, a dusky rose color that no cosmetic company could duplicate. Lips sweet and full and soft. No wonder the subjects of her interviews talked. The thought made him feel foolish. What the fuck was wrong with him? This was just another broad who happened to be better-looking than most. She was still just a broad.

"Sit down," he said.

"Thank you. I've never met a private eye before. No trenchcoat, no gun?"

"I only carry a gun when I talk to the landlord at my office building—and I only wear the trenchcoat to bed."

She was amused.

"Listen, I have to ask you a big favor," he went on.

She nodded.

"Can we postpone the interview until tonight. Maybe over dinner?" He gestured toward the telephone. "That call. It was business and urgent. If I have to—if you can't make the dinner thing—I'll put it off but I'd rather not."

She thought about it only briefly. There was no big act.

"All right," she said.

"Where do you live? Where can I pick you up? Around eight."

"Oh. Well, I live in Westchester, with my parents. Yonkers. But that's too long a trip." Moment of thought, small, tapering finger of a small, very feminine hand to edge of her full-bottomed lip. "I'll tell you what—I have a friend who has an apartment where I can freshen up and borrow something

to wear. We're about the same size. One Eleven East Fifty-fourth—that's the corner of Park. Apartment six-D. Can you make it at eight?"

"Great. And I'm really sorry about this. I mean, wasting your time. . . ."

"Don't worry about it." She was already moving toward the door. His gaze fastened onto the smoothness of the bare back and the movement of the small but high and rounded cheeks beneath the thin summer cloth of the skirt.

Summer in New York. The young ladies and their designers had turned it into an erotic festival.

"You're very kind," he told her.

She half-smiled back over a round, soft shoulder and was gone. The scent of her was still in the room, though. He hadn't noticed it while she was there, but now he got it. No one thing. Neither soap, nor deodorant, nor cologne, nor powder, but all those things, blended with a woman smell so subtle he wasn't sure it was there—but it was.

He breathed deeply.

"And you got one great ass," he added into the phone.

"What?" Anderozzi growled.

"Not you, fuckhead. What's the problem?"

His big belly, hips and legs hidden behind the cash counter, Rube Posey rested his elbows on the glass and hunched his narrow shoulders. He was pretending not to look at the two cops, while at the same time he watched them closely. He didn't know for sure they were heat, about to announce themselves, or just wanderers.

It wasn't true, as some dudes said, that you could smell them. Rube didn't know what an aura was, but if he had known he would have said that was

it: there was an aura about them. After twenty years of owning poolrooms, dark and dank places such as this, your instincts touched on the aura and said the Man is here.

What did they want? Posey wasn't really worried. Right now, the place was clean. The Book and the Runner were only there in the morning. The Connection was in the back someplace, but only for taking orders. That was as clean as ordering frozen beans at the A&P. The deliveries were outside. In looks, the Connection had such a sweet round face the only thing the Man might wonder is what a nice boy like that was doing in a joint like this.

There was a little pad under the counter and Posey kept track on that. Every time the Connection went out with a customer, Posey made a little check mark on the pad. The Connection owed him something. The only thing that pissed him was he never really knew for what nor how much. Was it ten per cent of ten dollars for a piece of ass or was it twenty per cent of seven-fifty for an acid drop? He knew, of course, that the little prick lied to him all the time, but the way they had it set there wasn't much he could do to prove it. So he stood still, just so long as the take didn't drop below one-fifty a week.

Posey casually glanced at, and then beyond, the two men sitting in the gallery in two of a row of theater-type chairs on a raised platform, overlooking the rectangular green islands in the sea of smoke. There had been other cops; they just checked him out about once a month. But these two looked special. The older one, tall and sparely built but tough as ripcord and piano-wire twined, with a face like a pig-killing knife. He was the Man with stripes on his sleeve.

The spade puzzled Posey, though. He was cop and, yet, there was something a little different about him. Just the way he sat and used those big hands when he talked, you got a feeling of free-wheeling that was out of line. Posey was more worried about him than the other one. If they were going to bust one of his customers, and there was any trouble, it could be messy. You look at that black man, you know he's not going to fool around. He'll beat the shit out of you, maybe kill you. Posey was worried about the high replacement cost of pool tables, teeth and kidneys.

Posey left his counter, rolled over to the small coffee-and-sandwiches concession, and got black coffee. In a mirror, he watched the black man and the white man. They were just sitting there now, no longer talking. The white man's long, lean frame was jackknifed on the base of his spine into the chair. The other one sat more erectly, big brown fingers clasped together over the flatness of his stomach. They were both watching the brunette in the white hot pants playing rotation with a mod-dressed middle-aged man, who hoped that his expensive tailoring covered the sag of his gut.

Sighing, Posey thought: Maybe I'm just getting shook about nothing. They're killing a little time and then they'll leave....

Shaft watched the brunette move around the table, looking for the best angle for her shot, watched her bend over to make the shot. She still carried a little baby fat to crease the shorts in soft ripples. From the corner of his eye, Shaft watched Anderozzi concentrating on the view.

"Looks like the fat side of a dead pig in Vito the butcher's window," Shaft said.

Anderozzi grunted.

"Y'know something, Lieutenant?"

"What?"

"You ain't had any until you try a long, lean, black chick."

"I know. I tried once, but she hit me with her picket sign. I'm back to peeping at broads like this."

"You want me to fix you up?"

"What are you gonna do? Paint me with Shinola? As much as I enjoy sitting around poolrooms talking about snatch, let's go back to business, okay?"

Just two guys talking—one a private eye and the other a captain of detectives on special assignment who was responsible only to the commissioner. Not really good friends, not enemies, either.

"All right," Anderozzi pressed on. "What do you think?"

Shaft pulled at his lower lip and then scratched the saddle-stitching scar across the back of one hand, memento of a bike-chain whipping during a teen-age gang boff on a Harlem side street.

"I don't know. That crazy fucked-up Buford—I'd believe almost anything. Except maybe his masterminding a half-million-dollar ripoff. That takes cool and Buford ain't cool. That mother is a revolutionary idealist right up to his high-pockets black ass. If you told me that he was planning to blow up city hall, I'd buy it."

"They need the money," Anderozzi said. "Six of his people waiting trial, bond at fifty grand apiece. The lawyer's getting rich. Where's all that bread coming from? You know Buford won't sleep until they're out. Those groups are in a constant bind for money."

Shaft thought about it. "Ah, bullshit. Ben's not

a thief and he's not even in town. On a lecture tour of colleges in the Midwest."

"Oh, come on, John. How long does it take to fly to New York?"

"And your source stinks. You got some little junkie chick on ice for possession and while she's dancing with the turkey and begging for a fix, she gives you this little item. Except that it's so goddamned vague! She doesn't know any details. All she knows is that while she was high, she overheard about a big heist—except that she didn't even know who was talking, if Buford was there. Nothing except that the chick would probably sell her mother to an Arab pimp for a spikeful when her belly hurts and her teeth are clicking like castanets. She had to have something to trade for the needle so she gave you Buford as a big-time heist guy with a five-hundred-grand plan. My ass. Buford couldn't steal subway fare off half the kids in Harlem. They'd whip his ass."

Anderozzi slid lower in the chair and hooked the ankle of one long, slim leg over the knee of the other. His fingers were templed beneath his thin, jutting jaw. His cold, sharp eyes were brooding.

"Sure," he said. "So it could be a bummer. So you find out for me. If we know what the gambit is, we can move in and save Buford a lot of trouble."

"Oh, bullshit," Shaft snapped. "You ain't any more interested in saving Buford from getting his ass in a crack than I am. He's got a good thing, talking about revolution and chasing tail around the campuses. If he gives it up, that's his problem. Just means there's more stuff around for the rest of us."

"You're a friend of Buford's."

"With a friend like him, I don't need enemies."

"You owe him a favor. A few to me, too."

"Balls, baby! We're all canceled out."

Anderozzi sighed. He stood up, bending to straighten the cuffs of his beige linen slacks. He turned his angular ax-blade face toward Shaft. The eyes that fastened their gaze on Shaft's were like glare-ice.

"Thanks, John," he said softly. "You've often been a big pain in the ass to me, maybe more trouble than you've been worth. It's nice to know I won't be needing to go through that again. You're right. We're square, and from now on I'll take it from there."

Shaft stood, too, coming up out of the seat with the blurring, smooth speed of a rattler uncoiling. "You can make a lot of trouble for me. Right? Any investigator has to break some laws once in a while. Right? And if he doesn't have an Anderozzi around to cover a little, he could lose his license—or maybe even pull a little time. You miserable sonofabitch, you just try to hang me! I'll have a piece of your guinea ass before I go through the floor!"

Anderozzi's thin mouth quirked just a little. "You don't have to make your mind up all of a sudden, John. Can I give you a lift, someplace?"

"Not while I got two legs to walk on. Anyhow, I got some business here." He jerked his head toward Rube Posey.

"I wondered why you picked this dump. But don't be too hard on Rube Posey. His people probably won't lay the Kronsky kid up for more than a month. It's nice to see you help some of your friends."

Shaft watched Anderozzi walk away. The sonofabitch knew everything. Well, almost, anyhow. Except he'd been wrong. Albert Kronsky wasn't any

friend. The kid was a dumb, lazy, horse-playing little creep and Shaft couldn't have cared less if the loan sharks tore off his head and played bean-bag with it. But he didn't want to hear one more Polack wail out of Mrs. Kronsky about her baby. How could she scrub the can in his apartment if she spent all day weeping?

Shaft avoided meeting Rube Posey's anxious gaze until he had moved around behind the counter.

"Hey!" Posey's reedy voice quaked a little. "No customer's allowed back here. Rules of the house."

"Fuck your rules," Shaft told him quietly. "I'm not a customer. But you got one name of Albert Kronsky."

"I—the name's not familiar."

"Sure it is. Skinny, pimply face, young Polack punk. Hustles a little pool in here sometimes. Also uses the Connection to lay a little loot on the horses. And sometimes to borrow from a shark when he taps out."

"I—I don't . . ."

"Knock off the shit. I'm telling you." He figured Posey had made him as a cop. "This isn't an official call, just a little personal thing. Kronsky's friend of a friend. He's sick-worried about some talk going on about getting his leg broken because he can't pay a couple hundred he owes, along with about three times that in interest. You know the kid."

"Yeah, well. A guy borrows, he's got to——"

"He's paid up," Shaft said.

"What?"

"He's paid up. I'm gonna give you a little something on account and if anybody so much as musses Albert Kronsky's greasy hair, I'm coming back to give you the whole thing."

"You're gonna give me——?"

"Yeah, but first write this down: you don't take Kronsky's action, you spread the word his credit is no good, and you get him barred from every joint and book in town."

"What?"

"Write it down," Shaft said.

Posey took the pad with trembling hands and wrote across the little checkmarks, just as Shaft told him.

He didn't believe what he was doing, but he did it anyway. The cop—this cop, whatever he was—seemed to be saying that Posey's world was coming to an end.

"Okay," he said. "See? I wrote it. Is that okay?"

"Sure," Shaft said, letting it go. It was probably not as good a left hook as a stand-up heavyweight might throw. But it was pretty good and Rube Posey, fat in his corruption, was a wonderful target.

"Jesus Christ," the Connection said to himself in the rear of the place, where he could see Rube fly off the high stool and slam right through the wallboard. Posey hung there in his private darkness, wedged between two studs. "Jesus Christ," he repeated as Shaft walked out.

Before he showered and shaved, Shaft read the biographical blurb that accompanied Winifred Guiterrez's story in the magazine. Born and raised in East Los Angeles. Degree in journalism from East LA City College. Father Mexican, mother Afro-American. Single. Hobbies, tennis, swimming, boxing.

Boxing?

Twenty-four years old, worked two years on the

staff of *The LA Free Press* before her writing talent took her to the magazine, where she'd been a staff member now for the last year and a half.

Shaft tossed the magazine back on the cocktail table. Boxing?

In the shower, he remembered the flash of her legs through the slit of the skirt and the rise of her rump.

Later, in front of the full-length bathroom mirror, he briefly studied his tall, solidly constructed frame from all angles, looking for any sign of flab. He hadn't been in the gym for a couple of weeks, but there was no sign of falling apart or fleshing out. He noticed that the bullet scars in his left shoulder and just below the ribcage on his left side, souvenirs from his shootout with Ben Fischer, the Israeli gunman, were healed neatly now and still only slightly indented; except for being smaller, they pretty much resembled the other three bullet holes, little presents from a Vietcong kid, south of Danang. He'd read someplace of people rubbing vitamin E onto scars, and the scars disappearing because of it. The scars, not the people. But did they make dark-brown vitamin E? Two of those old wounds were in the fleshy part of the thigh. The other one, almost centered between the two latest wounds, was still decorated by the thin pale mark of a surgical knife and the hem-stitching that followed. Not too bad, really, considering the extensive work necessary by the base-hospital surgeon in restringing his intestines together.

He nodded at the scars. He couldn't remember the pain, really—bullets took you out with such numbing shock. But the impact still pressed against him when he thought about it. Suddenly, Shaft looked closer at the mirror, his hand flashing to the wiry

black hair at this temple. Goddamn, it couldn't be. Not that suddenly. They hadn't been there this morning when he'd shaved. But they were there now. Four or five iron-gray hairs in the slightly bushy thickness above each sideburn.

It annoyed him. Gray hair? Shaft? Maybe if he rubbed vitamin E all over his head . . . bullshit. He looked again. Must be eight goddamn gray hairs in his head. He suddenly saw himself old, crippled up with bullet holes, white head nodding in an afternoon sun. Poor old Shaft.

"You live that long, motherfucker, and you'll be doing just fine even if your ass turns gray," he told his own image, and turned away.

Out of the bathroom, he dressed quickly but carefully. He hated cheap flash in clothes and it was hard for him to be anything but tasteful. As befitted a man of his means and reputation, about to be interviewed by the loveliest writer of a national magazine, he wore quiet, tasteful robin's-egg-blue silk shorts, an almost silent pearl-gray shirt, then a completely unbusy pale maroon tie, snugged up against a loosely flowing collar. Overall, the not quite silver-colored, hand-tailored raw silk suit he'd picked up in Shanghai.

At final inspection in front of a mirror, shooting the cuffs of the shirt, liking the dull gold sheen of the cuff links, Shaft thought: That's a long way from Lenox Avenue, baby. He wondered what the ugly black cop who had beaten everything but the balls off him with a nightstick when he was running in the streets, would think of him now. Or the juvenile officer who had told him: "That's the other choice, kid. If any of the services will take you, which I don't know why in the hell they should." But of course they did, because they needed crazy

bastards who would never back up in a fight because there was only the wall of society behind them.

Shaft went to the small bar, took a couple of cubes from the ice bucket, dropped them into a short highball glass, then splashed Johnnie Walker into the glass. Sipping the drink, pacing the room, he thought about Anderozzi.

Funky if not freaky. If anybody but Anderozzi had tried to tell him that Brother Buford, the golden-tongued Jolly Black Giant of the movement, was fixing to get into big-league grand larceny, Shaft would have put it down as gossip from a funny factory. But Anderozzi. . . . He obviously believed the fragment might be part of a larger thing. Which meant there was some possibility of it being half-true.

But where do you find half a million? Shaft thought of places to go rob. At the race track? Only in the flicks, man. No matter how easy the big-caper films made it look, in reality it was too complicated, too many people would have to be in on it, too many things could too easily go wrong. Okay, an armored truck heist, then? Shit! How many of them had ever really gotten away with the bread? The Feds were running machine-gun barrels up the crack in your tail before the counting began. Payrolls? That big, they used checks. So where? How?

Shaft told himself that, if he really knew, he might try it himself. Except all he ever got out of stealing was a bust across the head.

So what he had to do was learn if Buford was in the city and, if so, dig him out from whatever rock he was hiding under. Anderozzi was right, goddamnit. He probably did owe Buford one. The

Sullivan Street bonfire—he owed him one for that. But it was hard to do a favor for a man who was such a pain in the ass.

All he had to do was tell Ben that Anderozzi knew and was ready to bust him. Or maybe he would put a lump on Buford's head. Tomorrow . . .

Seven-fifteen. He would have to leave to go pick up the girl in another twenty minutes; that meant making a reservation for dinner. He was very hungry for some reason. Where could he take her that would have good food and an atmosphere that would relax and please her? The catalogue in his mind finally took him to a small, simple Italian restaurant on West Forty-second Street near the corner of Ninth Avenue. It was operated by somebody named Sardi, not the same one who ran the Sardi's East and West that were full of show-business assholes trying to catch a glimpse of themselves in the mirrors, and everybody rushing to make a curtain. This was a quieter, simpler Sardi's and the food was brilliant. Any broad who liked boxing should like garlic.

At the door of the Park Avenue apartment, Winifred was holding an eighty-five-pound monster Alsatian by the collar as the animal drooled on his shoe and contemplated the rich protein content of his leg.

"Hi!" she said. "This is Animal. Easy, boy. This is a friend. It's okay." The dog blinked his bloodshot eyes and looked disappointed. This sonofabitch could eat a whole human being if he tried, Shaft thought. And he looks hungry. She turned loose the collar and the Alsatian backed off. Shaft eased inside. His own appetite had passed.

"Isn't he cute?" she said. "He's Marilyn's roommate and guardian. Don't encourage him or be too nice, or he'll want to sit in your lap."

He'll have a hell of a time sitting while I'm running, Shaft thought.

"Sure," he said. He looked at the huge white beast. "Did he eat anybody famous lately?"

"That's not fair," she said. "He's almost too friendly. His feelings get hurt."

You couldn't hurt that dog with a two-by-four across the head. He'd bite it in half.

"I'll apologize later," Shaft said. "Let's go eat."

Winifred Guiterrez was encased in a white pants suit. It couldn't have fit better if somebody had put it on with a putty knife. He watched it move with the firm flexibility of her skin as she went to a small table and picked up a white-beaded purse.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To a restaurant," he said.

"Just a moment," she said, and stepped into one of the other rooms, maybe to get a nine-inch hatpin that marked her membership in the Back of the Taxi Self-Defense League. He considered the fact that of the several women he had dated in his life, none of them ever seemed to have to take a leak. He'd excuse himself to go to the can, but they never did. What was wrong with them?

While she was gone, Shaft watched the dog. Down onto forepaws first, big rump arching upward, tail looping out and up. Was he waiting for a chance to spring?

Then the dog flopped the rest of the way down.

Jeezus! Shaft thought, that bastard must eat half a horse a day. An ax-murderer's dog; he could feed the victim to Fido.

He turned to look at a picture on an end table. It was an enlarged photo of a tall, big-framed girl, in a tank suit, holding a silver cup and smiling triumphantly. She had short-cropped reddish hair. The tank suit really showed off her body, the long, full-thighed legs, small mound of tummy, and a hint of the crease below it. She was slightly flat-breasted for her size, but he liked that. Niblet nipples popped out the nylon. The water had been cold or winning turned this girl on. She had what was known as a pretty face.

Behind him, Winifred said: "That's my friend, Marilyn, who lives here. She won some kind of an AAU swimming meet. Backstroke or something."

"Yeah," Shaft said, mumbling something about Marilyn being a nice-looking girl.

In the taxicab, Shaft remembered this was an interview. "Where's your shorthand pad and pencil?"

She laughed. "I don't take notes. It stifles people. I have perfect recall—at least for a day or so."

"Okay, why don't we get started now? I've been waiting all day to talk about myself."

"Well, that gives me a good lead—what a shy and modest fellow you are."

"And beautiful, too." He laughed. "All right. End of bullshit. I'll start with the basic facts. Born Harlem, brought up Harlem, several times almost died Harlem, momma was the welfare department, papa was . . . I don't know. Several juvenile busts, Harlem. Enlisted marines, juvenile court. Boot camp, Parris Island. Boxing team there, light heavyweight. Honor man in company, rewarded with a fast trip to Nam. Big war hero. Wounded, chest full of fruit salad for shooting up fourteen-

year-old Cong kids, because if you didn't they would blow *your* ass off, but you still have bad dreams about their thin little slant-eyed faces.

"Back to the states and into NYU. Figured all lawyers are rich, like doctors without having to cut up people, so tried law. Blew it. Couldn't sit still. Into investigation work, first for a big-assed nationally known agency. Two years learnin'. Then my own business. That's it. Now we can enjoy a nice quiet dinner without a lot of questions."

She didn't say anything for a moment. Then, staring up at the roof of the cab, she said softly: "John Shaft is a big brown bear of a man, rough, tough and a little bitter, who *really* doesn't like to talk about himself although he pretends he does. So I knew I'd have to dig the details out of him. End of quote. Right?"

"Wrong. I'm really a softie, lulled into a false sense of security by all the sweet milk of human kindness that's been forced down my throat."

"It's funny," she said, "but I kind of had a hunch you'd done some boxing, the first time I saw you. The way you move. Yet I didn't see any scar tissue over the eyes. The one you have there didn't come from a fist."

He looked at the matching one on the back of his hand. "Bike chain. They were big when I was a kid. Took part of it on the hand. Saved my eye. It didn't help the other kid, though. I lost my temper and I had a piece of iron pipe two feet long . . . You *really* a fight buff?"

"Not strictly speaking. My stepfather was and I used to watch them every week on TV. The good ones, the good boxer-punchers, were interesting to watch. Like a kind of violent ballet. I have a feeling you were a good one. What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I don't mind working up a sweat, but I never had a mind to serve my head up as an order of scrambled eggs for nickel-dime purses. There ain't anybody I ever met I couldn't take in the street. But stand-up punching bag I ain't. Fighting that way, a good heavyweight could kill me. And suicide is easier with a gas oven."

The cab pulled to the curb on West Forty-second Street. Getting out, Shaft's hand holding her by the upper arm, he felt the warm firmness of her coppery flesh, the back of his hand tingling to the sensation that only comes from the touch of a woman's breast.

He took his hand away. He wanted to touch again—but not here, not now.

Between the prosciutto and melon and the antipasto, there was a feast of conversation.

"John, you don't have to go into this, of course, and please understand, I'm not just prying. Just trying to get a rounded picture."

"Sure, I know. John Shaft, in *depth*. Go ahead."

"Well, like family. I don't want to put down a city agency."

"Sure. No brothers, no sisters. Mother and father. Yeah. The mother, that is, anyhow. She died when I was two. The two jobs helped. Scrubbing office floors all night, seamstressing all day, popping uppers to keep going. She had a dizzy spell, washing our windows in our fourth-floor walk-up, fell, and made a big splash on the sidewalk. The old man, when I was born, he decided he didn't like my looks or something and took off. Someone told me he was a numbers runner and wound up with his throat razor-cut when some dude caught him with his wife. The rest of it was foster-home shit and I don't have to tell you about that. Some okay, some awful."

She sipped delicately at the Asti spumante. He

watched the way her lips moved and the way her little pink tongue sometimes flicked over them, savoring the taste of the dry, sparkling white wine.

"No, you don't have to tell me about that," she said levelly, and he made a note to ask her, sometime, what it was like to be both black and Chicano in East Los Angeles in the 'fifties and 'sixties.

"Okay. This is going to sound like a dumb question, but I think our readers would like to know the truth. How often is your work really dangerous?"

He signaled the waiter that they were ready for the next course. "Not dumb," he said. "Maybe just tough to answer without sounding fatuous. Ninety per cent of the jobs, the bread-and-butter stuff that pays the rent, the answering service and the telephone bill, is routine. Divorce crap, insurance claims —shit like that. Once in a while there's something bigger, and that's where the heavy bread is, and when there's heavy bread involved, they want you to put it on the line—your reputation, your license, your ass. So far I've been lucky with a few of those. No details, remember?"

She remembered. Between the *Gnocchi Alla Siciliana* and the *Osso Bucco*, digestion helped with drafts of Bardolino, a visit from a little gnome of a bald-headed waiter.

"Excuse, Mr. Shaft and lady. Someone on the telephone for Mr. Shaft. At the cashier's desk, please."

"That's interesting," Shaft said. "Because who the hell knows I'm here?" Shaft knew exactly who knew, of course.

As Shaft approached, the motherly-looking little old Italian lady cashier gestured toward the telephone and politely moved away.

Shaft picked up the receiver and said into the mouthpiece: "You swamp-guinea sonofabitch, if

you think I resent this intrusion, you're fucking well told."

Small pause at the other end. "I understand she's very nice, John. Sorry about this. But I thought you might want to know something."

"Do I get a choice?"

"No. Like Celia Constance Ferguson got bailed out."

"Thanks. Who gives a shit?"

"She's called CeeCee. The smackhead we talked about this afternoon. One of Ben Buford's girlfriends. Now, who would post twenty-five-hundred bond for a skinny little white bitch who likes to ball black revolutionaries, we wondered. We didn't find out."

"Of course not. You put one or two of your supersleuths on them and they lost 'em. Right?"

"Why, John? Why all this trouble over a poor, lost, little bedraggled broad who's a dime a dozen all over town?"

"I don't know. My ravioli is getting cold."

"If what she told us about Ben Buford was straight, we'll probably find her in the trunk of a stolen car somewhere."

"Come on, Vic. Ben couldn't kill a fried banana. Good night, wop."

He gently rested the telephone back in its cradle, nodded a smiling thank you to the little old cashier who pretended she hadn't heard a thing, and returned to his table.

"Sorry," he said to Winifred. "My answering service follows me everywhere." She smiled, accepting.

A ragged fingernail of worry caught at the fabric of his peace. Why the hell didn't Buford just have himself committed and get it over with?

She was so deeply involved with the succulent

main course of veal shank, served with *fagiolini, asparago,* and *risotto,* that there were no more questions for a while. They ate in easy silence.

After the *Quesso di Parma,* Shaft dabbed his lips with a napkin, slightly suppressed a small burp and said: "I don't know about you, but I've just about had it with South-of-the-Alps soul food. Would you like to go up to my place for *Strega* and *espresso* . . . and the rest of the questions, of course."

She laughed. "You don't frighten me, even as you leer and curl your mustache."

On the way, he took her hand and gave it a quick, warm squeeze. "This is the only part I don't like about luring young chicks into the Arab slave racket. But I'm going to see that they give you a comfortable camel in exchange for your innocence."

She didn't laugh. "You don't grow up innocent in the barrio, John."

He let it go. She had the barrio, he had Harlem. Whatever those experiences had been, the two of them had grown into something else, composites of experiences since the slums. She was really just a baby at twenty-four—he had eight years on her, as well as the crucible of those moments when pain and death asked him what it was all about.

They took the elevator. He stared at her long and hard. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"I'm trying to bring on a power failure that will trap us here for about four hours."

She frowned a little. "I really don't like the oblique approach."

He shrugged. "Okay."

Man, he asked himself, what kind of shit am I trying to lay down with this one? First thing you

know, I'll be tickling the palm of her hand and telling her how good sex is for the nerves.

He opened the bolt lock first and then the regular one. His big hand on the doorknob turned and pushed. The door opened a couple of inches and stopped. There was light inside. He hadn't left any lights on and some dumb sonofabitch was trying to hold the door on him. Or had stacked furniture against it. He pulled the girl back against the wall, to one side of the door. He felt adrenalin pumping through the heavy weight of the dinner.

"John, what——?"

His palm covered her mouth. "Get out of here," he hissed. "Take the stairs, end of hall. Wait for me on the street. If I'm not down in ten minutes, get some cops up here."

She nodded and he gave her a gentle shove toward the stairwell, watching the door closely, waiting. When she opened the stairwell door and was gone, Shaft stepped back in front of his own door. He put the flat of his shoe against it and shoved, once more sliding out of the way of any possible shooting. The door budged another few inches and stuck again.

Shaft took off his jacket, stuck his fist into one shoulder of it, and thrust it inside the door. Nothing happened. There was no sound from within the apartment. This time, he hit the door with one shoulder and it budged enough for him to edge his way inside. He looked down at the thing that had been propped up to hold the door shut.

She was hunched over like a Mexican peon dozing in a siesta. Her brown hair, too long, too stringy, too long unwashed, had tumbled over her face. She was naked. He gave her only a quick glance and then strode quickly through the other rooms, checking out

closets. There was nobody there. In the kitchen, he learned how they had gotten in. And out. The window was open. On the foot-wide ledge outside that led to the fire escape were two round pieces of glass stuck to patches of old-fashioned flypaper.

"Shit!" he said aloud. "What kind of junky old movies they been watching?" The oldest game in the town. Glass cutter. The flypaper to keep the glass from falling, shattering, making noise. Then reach in and undo the special safety locks. Neat but not gaudy.

He walked back out to the front door. He touched the girl's shoulder lightly with the toe of his shoe. She went slowly over sideways like a rag doll. Although much too thin, she might have been pretty before she was dead. Even with the track marks on her arm and thigh. Needle Nellie takes her last trip. Her eyes stared glassily, the slightly thick-lipped mouth gaping. Her breasts were almost childlike, faint swellings, topped with tiny pink nipples. Near one of them was a small tattoo. A butterfly.

Across her slightly protruding belly, just above sparse, mouse-brown pubic hair, was a message written in lipstick.

"FUCK OFF SHAFT."

Well. It was one way of sending messages.

She was maybe twenty-two, twenty-three. He guessed the cause of death had been a shot. But not with a bullet. He looked at the tracks in a number of places where a vein was available. The big one, still raw-looking, was in the vein at the crook of the elbow. When she got this one, nobody cared whether it would show. It was the last one, the Hot Shot, the OD.

CeeCee. Celia Constance Ferguson. Right now

probably trying to make a connection with the big pusher down in the fiery depths below.

"Sonofabitch!" Shaft said suddenly, remembering, then he yanked open the door, closed it, ran toward the stairs and down them and out onto the street. He sucked in a breath of relief. No cops coming before he was ready for them. Winifred Guiterrez was still standing there on the street, a worried look on her pretty face.

"Are you all right?" she said. "What was it?"

"Not too much. Just a visitor trying to be cute, funny." He fished a five out of his pocket and held it out to her. "The pain in the ass is that it's going to tie me up the rest of the night. You take a cab up to your girlfriend's and we'll talk tomorrow. I'm really sorry but, believe me, I can't help it."

She shook her head at the proffered money. "It's okay. I can afford a cab. Where do I get one?" There was fury in her eyes.

"Across the street, in that bar. Ask them to call one. Anybody tries to give you a hard time, just tell the barkeep Rollie that you're a friend of mine."

Some interview he'd get. She'd have his ass for this in that little column, but he couldn't explain. He couldn't even promise to explain. He turned and loped back into the building.

CeeCee hadn't gone anywhere and the way this whole thing had been set up, Shaft felt a little relieved about that. It could have happened. Like in one of those old (or new) haunted-house movies. Somebody's there—even a dead somebody—and then they're not.

He went to the bathroom and got some tissues and wiped enough of the lipstick message from her abdomen so that at least it would be unintelligible, then

flushed the tissue and washed his hands. He looked at the few rags of clothing next to the dead girl's body. Should he try to dress her again? Why bother? It wouldn't, couldn't, help her now. He looked at her again, shaking his head. Was this what Ben Buford found captivating, exciting? Jesus!

Okay. So what now, brown cow? Shaft asked himself. Call Anderozzi. What else?

Shaft had an idea that Anderozzi knew where the girl's body was, right from the moment Shaft started to talk, in spite of his trying to be cute about it. There was this body, Shaft explained, that had to be moved without everybody in the building and the neighborhood knowing what was happening. Otherwise, he would move it somewhere himself, thus causing the NYPD an extra little problem.

It probably could be arranged, Anderozzi agreed. No meat wagon, just an ambulance, and they'd take her out on a stretcher. Acute appendicitis or something.

"That'll do it, I guess," Shaft said.

"All right, John. They'll be over to your place in a little while." The sonofabitch *did* know. "Looks like somebody's trying to tell you something, doesn't it?"

"Like what?"

"Don't go looking for Buford. Which makes it look more and more as though there's something to what CeeCee told us."

"Yeah, only how would anybody on the outside know she talked?"

"There are ways. Things from the inside get to the outside pretty fast."

"Who bailed her out?"

"The name doesn't mean anything. It was a phony. Bond was cash."

"Your people tailed 'em for a while. What'd the dude look like?"

"Short, stocky, black, partially bald, sunglasses, well dressed. That help you any?"

"Sure. Narrows it down to a couple hundred thousand people. But it's a start. I don't like people who do things like this."

"You want somebody to come over and check for fingerprints?"

"Ha-ha-ha."

"Shaft, don't hang up yet."

"Yeah?"

"You asked this afternoon since when did our department hire expensive private investigators. We don't, but I could turn you on to something good. Providing you'll use your off-time to try and find Buford and/or what the hell is going on, if anything."

"What kind of job?"

"A black man, rather large in politics, well known and not too popular with the red-neck crowd, is coming to New York for a few days. He wants protection and a guide around the town. No cops, though. He wants us to recommend somebody. A hundred a day and expenses."

"Who is it?"

"I can't tell you over the phone. Ultra hush-hush. But he gets here tomorrow. What do you say?"

"What I always say when people offer me bread. Talk to you again tomorrow, then."

"I'm glad you didn't embarrass me by saying thanks, you unappreciative prick," Anderozzi said, clicking off. Shaft thought about their phone calls, his and Vic's. One or the other invariably hung up in an attempt to get the last word. But it never was.

He got out of the fancy suit, into some slacks and

a jacket. There was work to be done. And a short, fat little bald-headed motherfucker who was going to end up dead.

Shaft visited half-a-dozen hook-up hangouts in the East Village and it was three o'clock in the morning when he finally got his information. It took money and convincing that he wasn't heat, but just working for CeeCee Ferguson's family. Who was going to get hurt, he asked them, if he just had a talk with her about maybe going home?

The woman was about twenty-five, natural red hair, a little overripe in the body, not bad-looking except for a slight cast in one eye, which at times, from some angles, made her actually a little more attractive. There was a strawberry-type birthmark on the right side of her neck. She was still reasonably neat and clean for a spikehead.

Her name was Andrea. She still hadn't been without a fix long enough to show it, except for a little nervousness and not too subtle hinting for him to hurry up and get it over with so she could run with the money to buy her medicine.

They were sitting in a crack-walled, sparsely furnished room, a block or so from the scruffy little bar on First Avenue, where he'd picked her up. Finally, she stood up, pushing her breasts out at him, as she started unbuttoning her blouse.

"If you're ready," she said in what was supposed to be a sexy tone, "why don't we just get undressed? First, of course, I'll have to have my little present."

Why were whores coy about the money? "Yeah." Shaft stood up, too. "Ten bucks, you said. Right?"

"Uh-huh." She watched him take a roll of bills from his pocket and he watched her eyes light up and could almost see the little wheels going around

in her mind. How could she manage to roll this big black John and get the whole bundle?

He peeled off a fifty, held it toward her. "You got change?"

"Are you kidding? I don't even do this sort of thing when I have bread."

"Sure," he said. "Maybe there's some way you could earn the whole thing."

She licked her lips, eyeing the big bill greedily. "Yeah," she said, quickly. "Anything you want . . . except *really* weird things. I mean, no lighted cigarettes, no biting, stuff like that. I don't do no sadie-masie."

"All I want is some talk. We couldn't do it in the bar. Too many people listening."

She gave him a suspicious frown, but her gaze went right back to the fifty. "What kind of talk?"

"About CeeCee."

"I already *told* you, I don't know her very well. Listen, that was just a bunch of shit you were giving me before, wasn't it? About how she told you about me, where I hang out, because you didn't care for the little skinny ones. What are you, man, the law?"

He shook his head. "No. Private. Her folks hired me to find her, talk to her, try to get her to go home. They're worried about her and want to put her in a private hospital, get her off the stuff. You'd be doing her a favor."

She wasn't quite convinced. "And for the fifty, all I got to do is tell you where you can find her?"

"That's it."

"Okay, that's easy. Women's House of Detention. She got busted for holding."

"I know, but that doesn't help. I went there. She was already bailed out. This afternoon. The bonds-

man couldn't tell me who paid, not allowed to give out that information. But that's what I got to know. That's where she'll be, with whoever got her out. You probably have some ideas."

She thought about it. "You won't tell where you got the information?"

"Hell, no! I might need you again sometime. That wouldn't be very smart, to ruin a source, would it?"

She thought. "There's only one dude who'd put up that kind of bread for a kid like CeeCee."

"Who?"

"Guy named Georgie. I don't know his last name. Nobody does. He could have bailed her out for his stable."

"Pimp, huh?"

"Yeah, and his clients are all weirdos. They pay big loot, but Georgie has a tough time getting girls who'll do those sort of tricks."

"Where do I find him?"

"I don't know, except sometimes he hangs out in a place called Stewie's, on Third, a few blocks up from here. Now, do I get the money?"

"You ever see CeeCee with a tall, black dude, steel-rimmed glasses, smart-assed manner?"

"Yeah," she said, "just a few nights ago. At the place I just told you about, Stewie's. They were in a booth, having some kind of beef about something."

"Okay," Shaft said and gave her the fifty and took himself out of there.

2

Georgie fit the description Anderozzi had given him. Shaft spotted him immediately, sitting near the end of the bar. The place was about half-full. A few white working types sat at the bar, lapping draft beer. Two black hustlers stared into their drinks while they waited for a pick-up. In one of the few booths, an old auntie, white, with bleached-blond spit-curls over his forehead, talked earnestly with a frowning black youth who was obviously rough trade.

In the back, toward the restrooms, a thin little white man and a tall, lean, rawboned black were playing HiLowball on a coin-operated pool table.

Shaft eased onto a barstool one seat away from the man called Georgie. He ordered a Scotch and water and when the bartender brought it, he said: "Maybe you can do me a favor." He shoved a five-dollar bill across the bar. "I'm from out of town and I need a little action, y'know? Like, I mean a good-looking broad."

The bartender, old, tired, pouch-eyed, looked him over. He decided Shaft maybe could be, maybe wasn't, Vice, but he wasn't going to take any chances.

"I wouldn't know about anything like that," he said, flatly.

"Okay—sorry." Shaft drew the bill back toward

his change from the drink. "I guess maybe I got the wrong place."

The bartender didn't answer, and moved away. Shaft drummed his fingers on the bar, sipped his drink. Suddenly, he glanced in the back-bar mirror and caught the stocky black man with dark glasses, staring at him. Shaft stared back and Georgie turned his gaze away. A moment later, Georgie got up and walked back to talk with the big black at the pool table. Neither of them looked his way, but he knew they were talking about him. Okay, so maybe they knew who he was. It didn't really make that much difference.

Georgie came back to the bar and Shaft finished his drink, and signaled for another. This time, he said to the bartender: "I'm sorry, but I'm almost sure this is the place. I was told to ask for a guy named Georgie."

The man didn't even blink. "I don't know any of the customers by name."

"Oh, I see."

Georgie swung around on his stool to face him. He said, softly: "Shaft?"

Shaft didn't take it. Georgie tried again: "I said, your name's Shaft, isn't it." It wasn't a question.

"What?" Shaft said, shifting his gaze toward the other man. "You talking to me?"

"Yeah, you. Your name's Shaft, isn't it?"

He belly-laughed. "You puttin' me on, man. Nobody's got a name like that! What's his first handle —Give-'em-the?"

Georgie didn't think it was funny. "You look like him."

"That's his problem, baby. Well, anyhow, fuck it. I ain't gettin' anywhere here. Better take a quick piss and move on."

He downed the rest of the drink, swung off the stool.

As Shaft passed the pool table, he saw the big, rawboned player giving him the look-over. Shaft saw the indentation in the bridge of the man's broad nose and the welted scar tissue at the corner of one eyebrow. Ex-fighter, probably light-heavy, probably never very good. Hustling pool and working as muscle for a pimp.

The warm, rich, and acrid odor of the men's room would have driven him into the alley if all Shaft had to do was to evacuate his bladder. Typical. The real indignity of lesser beings, he had been forced to think on a number of occasions, was that they lived in stink.

There was a window, opening onto an alley, at the far end of the smallish, dark-brown room, just past the filthy washbowl and scarred metal mirror. They probably planned to dump him out there when they were through.

He stepped to the side of the door so that he would be behind it when it opened. He glanced at the uninspired graffiti on the wall. Bad as it was, it reminded him of his favorite. It appeared on the No Name Bar men's-room wall, as follows: "I'm six inches long and two inches wide—any takers?" And just below it: "Sure—but how big's your penis?"

The door slammed open and Shaft was chuckling when he hit it with his shoulder just at the right time to catch the tall, rangy black with the edge of it. He caught him while he was still off-balance. Shaft reached out and grabbed the muscles of the man's solar plexus, as one grabs a basketball, and clenched steel fingers.

It is like having your gut torn out with a pitchfork. The man's jaw, bladder, and bowels all fell

open in the excruciating pain and he rose in the air on the wings of agony and shock. Shaft yanked him forward with his handful of abdominal muscles and, like Homer in another odyssey, drove his fist into the small black head just below the left ear. There was a crunching, crushing feeling under his knuckles. This stray dog who chewed on the victims of a fat pimp was probably dead by the time he hit the urinal and bounced off to the floor.

Standing by the door again, Shaft guessed he'd have to count to ten, but only got to eight when the door opened and there was Georgie, the overhead light gleaming on his balding head, blinking off his sunglasses. His square-jawed face registered surprise at seeing Shaft standing there.

"Hey!" he managed to say just before Shaft's big, brown hand shot out, thumb and forefinger digging into the nerve centers under Georgie's jowly jaw.

Shaft pulled him into the room, holding him at arm's length, watching the brown glasses tumble off and crack on the floor, watching Georgie's bloodshot eyes bulge, shiny with fear and pain. He reached up to try to dislodge Shaft's grip before he passed out. Shaft grabbed the arm with his free hand, swung Georgie around, twisting the arm up behind him, spun him around to face the commode.

"That who you're looking for?"

"Don't—don't break . . ." Georgie pleaded.

"Why not?" Shaft jerked it up higher behind Georgie's back, bringing out a breath-sucking squeal of pain.

Shaft's foot struck into the hamstring behind Georgie's knee and the pimp went down onto his face. Shaft jammed the arch of his shoe into the fat, black neck, right under the jaw, put his weight

into it, at the same time twisting and pulling at the arm he still held.

"The ripping sound you're gonna hear, cocksucker, is your arm coming out of the socket. Listen close—or talk fast. Who gave you the bread to bail CeeCee?"

"I—I don't know," he sobbed.

Shaft pushed down with the foot, pulled, and twisted the arm. "It really makes a hell of a pop," he said.

The pimp screamed.

Shaft eased up enough on the arm so that Georgie was able to stop screaming. "Jorgenson," Georgie blubbered. "Dude I met at Attica. Oh, God, my arm!"

"White or black? Jorgenson?"

"Black. For—for Christ's sake, Shaft——!"

"Where'll I find him?"

"Ho-Hotel Shindler."

"Who worked with you? You didn't lug CeeCee up to my place by yourself."

"Couple white pushers, Swabbie and Lufflin."

"One more. What's Ben Buford got to do with this?"

"I don't know no Buford."

"You fat black prick."

It annoyed Shaft that vermin like this could peddle broads and drugs, even kill people, and live comfortably in the assumption that they could vomit on the world without retribution.

So he broke the arm and cut off the pimp's scream with a kick to the base of his spine.

There was no movement and no sound in the bar or poolroom when he walked out and went to the sink behind the bar. He washed his hands carefully, and dried them on some paper towels next to the

cash register. Then he went back around the bar and out the door.

"See you around," he said to the silence.

Victor Anderozzi sipped steaming black coffee from a container and took huge bites on a Danish as he read over a special report. That crazy bastard, Shaft, had been busy last night. First there had been an ambulance call to a dingy little First Avenue saloon. A black pimp, George "Georgie" Ainsworth, age forty-five, had a useless arm and a cracked spine, while an ex-fighter, Howard "Cannonball" Marcy, thirty-one and unemployed except as a part-time burglar, was in need of a county funeral. Georgie said the attackers were three, white robbers—with guns and clubs and Olympic medals. Shit.

The second interesting report listed two white heroin pushers, Michael Swabbie, age twenty-six, and Sidney Lufflin, age twenty-three, dead from overdoses of uncut heroin. Coroner's report stated that both men were found face down on the floor. There were no fingerprints on the hypodermics in the room. They had obviously worn gloves while shooting up, although no gloves were found.

Anderozzi shook his head, a little awed. Was Shaft getting soft? He, like a lot of the cops in New York, usually held pushers by the ankles over the edges of tenement rooftops. And then let go.

Neal Wickman, *aka* Bobby Weems, Tennessee Hunt, Florio Bates, and Vic Jorgenson, sat in a gold-brocaded lounge chair in his top-floor room of the Victoria Abbey Hotel, sipping black coffee, liberally laced with Martell's, reading *The New York Times*, both courtesy of room service. He had a small hangover, but he felt good.

He was reading the small items in the back pages of the back section of *The Times* about the fate of that idiot pimp, Georgie, and his muscle; the deaths of the two pushers, Swabbie and Lufflin, helped his mood considerably. He wondered if Georgie had blurted out who had picked up the tab for the CeeCee incident. Most likely. A man having his arm torn from the shoulder is not liable to be reticent. Wickman clucked his tongue. A direct and violent man, Shaft. He hoped they never crossed swords, literally or figuratively. He considered how ill-tempered Shaft had probably been at learning there was no Hotel Shindler and that the man Georgie had known in Attica as Vic Jorgenson had been declared legally dead three years ago.

Wickman studied the blunt, brown tips of his fingers. Fingerprints removed? Unfortunately, it happened during a fire when he tried to push open a white-hot metal door. How could anyone prove otherwise? He had no identifiable face or body scars, no tattoos. Blessed with perfect teeth that had been well taken care of, there was no betraying dental work in his mouth.

The small Ohio town where the automobile accident occurred had no coroner's office. The dead man resembled Jorgenson, had all of his identification papers in his wallet, and so as far as the small-town sheriff was concerned, the man *was* Jorgenson. A nicely forged birth certificate and Neal Wickman was born—at age thirty-eight.

There was a stirring on one of the twin hotel beds and Wickman, a lean, average-height, light-skinned man, with snow-white hair, brows and clipped mustache to match so that he slightly resembled a brown Caesar Romero, glanced toward the sound.

The blonde kicked off the covers. One arm was

thrown across her eyes. Bleached-yellow hair fanned across the pillow. The diamond between her thighs was dark brown by comparison. Wickman studied the large breasts that, instead of flattening and spreading in her supine position, pushed straight up from her chest. She said her husband had given them to her for Christmas. Silicone shots were expensive, and she called it a true-love gift.

He walked over to the bed and bent over to look closely at the underside of those monumental breasts. The small incision beneath each mound was palely visible.

"What are you staring at?" she said sleepily, moving her arm from across her eyes.

"Plastic tits," he said.

She pouted. "You didn't seem to find anything wrong with them last night."

"Who said anything was wrong with them? Get your ass out of bed. I'm expecting company."

She thumbed her nose at him and got up. He watched her move toward the bathroom.

"Is your ass plastic, too?" he asked. She ignored him and he walked over to the window, looked down from air-conditioned comfort onto the morning crowds of ant-people scurrying along the already sweltering pavement of Seventh Avenue.

Wickman hadn't worked for a living since his last parole ended, four years ago. The memory of that period still soured his stomach. Used car salesman in a black section of Kansas City. Sometimes a couple of hundred a week, sometimes not that much in a month, while the whitey owner of the lot drove a spanking new Mercedes and lived in a fifty-thousand-dollar house. Piss on that, even though at the time it served a purpose. It got him his high-school education in night school so that he could talk

whitey-type talk, using big words in the right places, making people think he was a real educated spade.

The job also enabled him to discover that his boss was stashing away a lot of under-the-table cash, that he hoped the IRS would never learn about, every week.

The minute Wickman's parole was over, he got together with a young safecracker he'd met in the Joint and they were both pleasantly surprised to find seventy-five grand in the safe in the boss's big house. They had hoped for maybe twenty, grossly underestimating the venality of their victim.

He'd never made a hit before for more than five thousand. At Monte Carlo, in one lucky night at the wheel, he ran the seventy-five up to a hundred and fifty and grew to love having that kind of money. Now it was just about gone, but there was going to be more, much more and soon.

The blonde came out of the bathroom, brushing her long, bleached hair. She threw the brush on the bed, got dressed. Watching her, Wickman wondered how some of them could look so damned good at night and like such dogs in the morning.

Finished dressing, she took her purse from a dresser, turned toward the door. She waggled her fingertips at Wickman, said: "See you."

"If you get lucky," Wickman said.

"Pig!" She spat it at him.

"If I am, that makes you a pig-fucker."

She went out, slamming the door.

Wickman showered and got dressed about ten minutes before the first knock on the door. Yancey. A smaller-than-average, compactly built man, neatly dressed in middle-priced men's clothing, Gimbels basement garb, he looked like what he had been for several years after his last jolt in the Joint—a suc-

cessful small-business man. He'd had it with crime. It was the straight line with him, from now on.

That's the way it was before Ben Buford's organization put the pressure on him to pay a percentage of his profits from the small string of restaurants he owned. Profits, he tried to make them understand, that he needed to plow back into the business for expansion, so that he could buy food in greater and cheaper quantities, make his own profit margin a little better, be able to pay his black employees more, and give more work to the community.

"Oh, no!" Yancey told Wickman. "That big horse-shit-spoutin' yo-yo didn't believe that. 'There can be no exceptions,' he tells me. 'We let you off the hook, lot of others'll start to squirm, too, Brother Yancey. And we need that bread to keep our own thing going. We'll be around tomorrow to pick up your donation.' "

There had been no donation. Yancey told them he didn't believe the whole white-black hassle could be wiped out the way they were digging at it. Politely, he'd told them to go fuck themselves and their revolution.

The boycott started immediately. When business fell off badly, Yancey was willing to change his tune and cough up. But now Buford didn't want to hear that song. Yancey was going to be an example. The organization had to make it perfectly clear that no black little-business shit who thought only of his own jive ass and not those of his black brothers everywhere was going to get away with bucking them.

Three months later, Yancey was filing bankruptcy.

Through the black underworld grapevine, with which nearly all black cons were constantly in touch,

Yancey learned that Neal Wickman was back from Europe and looking for a little something nice, something different, to rip off. Which meant a big one, a smart one. This Wickman was cool and clever, he heard. They got along right from the first meeting and Wickman was intrigued with the notion that they work out the details of a big heist and lay it off on Ben Buford.

It appealed to Wickman, who may have been sympathetic but didn't really believe in the revolution, figuring it made it even more difficult for the average black to get along and, in fact, merely made his ass a choicer target. The big appeal, though, was the notion of the Man breaking his balls to find and nail Buford, while he and Yancey and whoever worked with them, sat around comfortably counting their money, after a pleasant airline flight to Europe or North Africa.

So they both started looking for the gig. Wickman came up with it. Once he had done a big favor for a one-legged con who worked as chauffeur-butler for one of the big Nevada casino owners. Wickman had told him: "There's tall bread kicking around out there, man. You ever hear of any of it even being a little loose, you let me know."

There'd been a call from the man. He didn't really think Wickman would have a cotton-picking chance to get near it without being burned by tough Italian heat, but anyhow . . . there was a lot of skim money soon heading for New York, a last stop before some financial laundry in Europe. Fuck the Italians. They had been sick too long and were getting soft.

Wickman and Yancey worked it out. They didn't even pause to think about trying to knock off five couriers, each with a hundred grand cash in his attaché case, en route. They did, though, learn

where the pigeons were going to roost. They started from there.

Now the whole thing was well on its way. This was Wednesday morning. Friday night was it.

Yancey and Wickman slapped palms and Wickman showed him the items in *The Times*. "That's it," Wickman said. "The police bought it and Shaft bought it. Which means if Buford isn't in the city, somehow Shaft'll get him back here and that's what we want. Him on the scene. He'll be crated, nailed up, and ready to ship."

Yancey read the pieces in the newspaper, frowning, nodding a little, his thick, black brows drawing together over the bridge of his nose.

"Yeah," he said. "Only one thing."

"What's that?"

"Maybe Shaft bought it too good. Maybe the fuzz, too. Maybe they're one step ahead of us, because this cat who works at the Hotel Armand phoned me to say that Shaft was there, this morning, talking with the security officer."

Wickman's eyes bulged. "What? *What?* Oh, shit, man, no! You're putting me on."

"Uh-uh. It's gospel." Suddenly he laughed, slapped Wickman on the shoulder. "It's just a coincidence, man. He was there, sure. That's where a lot of political bigshots stay. Shaft's there on a bodyguard job for some black big wheel, some fucking name like Ojeebwah."

Wickman let out a long breath of relief. He was still shaken, though. "It's still not good. We got to get him *out* of that scene—and soon. Get the name of the guy Shaft's protecting and I'll figure something."

A few minutes later, the other three arrived. Jeff Bigger, the lockman, who claimed he could open the

vault at Fort Knox with a hairpin, if anyone could get him in and out alive. Andy LeDuc, soft, thirty-ish, and vaguely Oriental-looking, was the gunman. He had a collection of handguns, all shapes, sizes and nationalities, all clean, rifling screwed up to make ballistics testing more difficult if not impossible. If it became necessary, LeDuc had no compunctions about using his own inventory. If somebody had to be burned, that was his end. The others would use their heat only in desperate necessity.

Donny Graycoff was in charge of getting the wigs and costumes, the make-up. An ex-college basketball star who got caught in a point-shaving scandal, making him untouchable to the pro clubs, he worked as a sometime actor and all-the-time book for show-business horseplayers. He had long since decided that his was the shitty end of the stick. When asked what he would do for ten thousand dollars, cash, no tax, he said: "Kill my own mother. Or yours." He was in. If he'd demanded it, Wickman and Yancey would have given him an even bigger share. He was the key figure. Perhaps a couple of inches taller, otherwise, he was a fine double for the lanky, loose-limbed Ben Buford. With the right wig, the right specs, of course.

Wickman gave them each a copy of the original architectural plans of the Hotel Armand, on Central Park South. "Study them, especially the key points marked. Commit them to memory, then burn them and flush them down the john. Yancey and I both know the place by now like the back of our hand. Donny, when will the wigs and costumes be ready?"

"Tomorrow."

"Good. We'll meet at Bigger's apartment and try 'em on so that any necessary adjustments can be made. Sort of a dress rehearsal." He gave them a

grin. Then he said: "We've all seen the films of Buford, listened to the tapes of his voice. Donny's been studying them." He turned to the tall, skinny black. "Kid, give us an Academy-Award performance. This is probably the most important role you've ever played."

They watched Donny Graycoff walk around the room, impersonating Buford's stride, the arrogant carriage, the way he held his head, used his hands. They listened to him. Pointing a long, black finger toward the heavens, he said, "It's been too long coming. Tonight, your money; tomorrow, your government!"

Yancey shook his head. "I dunno. *Looks* okay, but there's something about the voice that's just not right. And those corny lines stink."

Wickman held up a hand. "Don't worry about it. As long as it's close. *No*body can duplicate exactly that voice of Buford's. So, okay, maybe he's a little hoarse or something. And nobody'll remember exactly what Donny says, just the gist of it. Maybe they'll think Ben is on something or scared. Especially leading a caper we're setting up. It's gonna work. It's so fucking crazy, it can't miss."

Donny Graycoff walked over to the window and looked out, staring at the theater marquees in Times Square, below. Fuck you all, he told himself. With ten thousand big ones, I got time to write my *own* play, show them what black theater should *really* be. Written and directed by and *starring* J. Donald Graycoff.

Wickman told Jeff Bigger, the lockman: "Stop by here about three this afternoon and I'll have the fake ID stuff for you and then check into the Armand, figure out what kind of problems you're going to have with the boxes and how long it's going to take

to open *all* of them. Most of them are going to be shit, but we have no way of knowing which ones. Don't *under*-calculate. You think it'll take forty-five minutes, tell us an hour, so we can be sure. Dig?"

Jeff nodded.

After they left, Wickman called Bingo, the bellhop at the Hotel Armand. The man John Shaft was bodyguarding was a senator from a midwestern state, a black man, a smoothie from a wealthy family who'd used his education, his carefully developed charm, natural good looks and ability to talk on his feet to create a political career with the White House as its improbable but possible goal.

Wickman knew they had to get him out of there, get rid of Shaft. With that crazy bastard around, anything could go wrong. But how? It took a while to think it out. He finally got past Shaft to the senator, a forty-year-old bachelor whose manner and mannerisms were as effete as his Republican politics.

He called a big, honky rough-trade character who specialized in wealthy blacks.

"I got a good one for you," he said. He described the senator, said to look for him in the lobby or bar of the Hotel Armand. "And he likes it *mean*. Y' know? He's masie, you're sadie."

He hung up without saying who was calling. The hustler wouldn't care or want to pay a finder's fee.

3

The head security officer of the Hotel Armand was a man named Drake, dressed to look like a loot-loaded tourist from Prairie du Sac. He was half an inch taller and a little bulkier in the shoulders than Shaft. He was icily polite, but he let you see the steel beneath the velvet, and was neither intimidated nor impressed by any big, black-buck private dick out for hire as a bodyguard. Shaft wondered if he wore his judo black belt to bed or kept it beneath his pillow. Shaft figured if it had to be done, it might take a good quarter hour to kick the shit out of Ira Drake. And then he'd have to work.

In his cubbyhole of an office, Drake checked out Shaft's credentials, then said: "Come with me, please." Shaft was sure that the "please" tasted like hummingbird shit on Drake's tongue—he got it off so quickly.

As they entered one of the elevators, along with several other people, Drake said in what was supposed to be a confidential whisper: "There's a special elevator that rides direct to the Presidential Suite but employees aren't allowed to use it. We get off at the twenty-ninth and walk up one flight."

"Well, I'll be a sonofabitch, what won't they think of next?" Shaft whispered.

At the tenth floor the elevator stopped, the doors

slid silently open, and three beautiful young creatures stepped in. One of them stabbed button number fourteen with the tip of a long, crimson fingernail. They were all wearing evening gowns and gold slippers. Each wore a frosted-blonde wig, piled like Dairy Queen. Sweeping, false eyelashes cast shadows on their rose cheeks. Fumes of sweet, musky pollution of Arpege hung over them in a cloud.

Shaft was speculating on the swell of the bodice on the nearest one, when it occurred to him that beneath the cosmetics the broad needed a shave.

Drag queens. And, as usual, there was a cloud of anger and outrage hovering about them.

The one standing next to the door turned to the tallest of the group. "You're a cunt," she said.

"So's your husband," the tall one said.

"Leave her out of it," the girl by the door demanded.

The car stopped, the door opened, and they got off.

Shaft glanced at Ira Drake. He was acting as though nothing had happened. Shaft couldn't let it ride. "You don't happen to know if the husband is a cunt, too, do you?"

Drake gave him a cold, how-dare-you look. "We don't question the private lives of our guests, as long as they behave themselves. They're part of a convention group, having their costumes fitted, I suppose, for the Grand Ball Friday night."

"Convention? You mean they all joined the Kiwanis Club or the Rotary?"

"The National Congress of GAY. Gay American Youth, that stands for."

Shaft chuckled. "How many are there?"

"Perhaps a couple hundred. They've been holding business meetings all week, and Friday they conclude with their costume ball."

"Without one set among 'em?"

"Set of what?"

"Balls," Shaft said.

Drake's fists curled at his sides and the ridge of his jaw turned white. Gray-green eyes narrowed and tried to pierce their way into Shaft's brain. "I don't know what kind of shit you're trying to lay on this hotel."

"Just ask yourself," Shaft said in the sincere tone of a senatorial candidate. "Would you want your brother . . . or sister . . . to marry one of those screaming cocksuckers?"

"Fuck you, Shaft."

"You wouldn't like it—I just lay there like a board," he said pleasantly.

The elevator hissed to a stop at the twenty-ninth floor. Shaft followed Drake along the deep carpeting to a steel door, with double locks. From a ring of keys, Drake opened the door with a master. They climbed a flight of stairs to another door which came with a husky but pot-bellied, sandy-haired man, a little younger than Drake.

"You can go now, Gingold. This is the professional guard for the senator. Wait for me down in my office."

Drake knocked on the door and Shaft heard the famous mellifluent voice ask: "Who is it?"

"Pete Drake, Senator. The man, Shaft, is here."

Bolts and locks clicked and the door was opened. He was wearing a bright-yellow floor-length terry robe with a huge collar and yellow slippers. The thick, wavy, gray-templed hair was attractively tousled, still uncombed. In person, he was even

lighter-colored and thinner than he appeared on television. Below the slightly hooked aquiline nose, the senator's lip was bare. Shaft remembered a mustache. Was its removal supposed to be a disguise? Only his hairdresser would be confused.

The almost-blinding, white teeth flashed in a welcoming smile. "Come in. Come in. Glad to have you aboard."

Oh, shit, Shaft thought, we are going to play commodore and crew.

Inside, the two men shook hands. Senator Albert Congdon Stovall's grip was firm without being snowy. Politicians couldn't very well play squeezy. The wide-set, intelligent brown eyes gave Shaft a quick once-over. He said: "I dig that jacket, man. Who's your tailor?"

"Cat named Mario. Got a place on North State in Chicago," Shaft said. He hoped the senator paid his bills; he didn't want to send Mario a stiff and fuck up his own account at the small, chic boutique near the Ambassador East, a place where most of show business and society crossed paths while trying on jackets and slacks.

The senator nodded. "Sure. I'll get there on my way through."

Stovall gestured toward a half-finished breakfast on the dining table. "Just finishing up. Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I've had enough."

The senator nodded toward a small, well-stocked bar. "Then a drink, maybe. Help yourself."

"Maybe at lunch." The senator was either being hospitable or testing him. It didn't matter.

"We're having lunch in the clubhouse at Belmont. You like the races?"

"Sure, both of them, black and white. And in between."

Stovall looked at him, bemusedly, as he gnawed on an English muffin, well spread with *petit suisse* and *bar le duc*. He thought a moment. "My great-granddaddy, he was white, they tell me. I never knew the old bastard. He got himself killed in a duel."

"Them white folks and their razor fights," Shaft noted with a tone of lament. "Shit like that could've kept you out of Groton."

"Oh, you know about that. Broke the color barrier there, you know. Of course, all the outraged parents were led to believe I wasn't really a spade but an East Indian. That's one cut above a drunken Indian."

He stood up, dabbing his full, sensual-looking lips with a linen napkin. "Sit down and relax, read, turn on the TV, whatever. I'll take a shower, tackle some paperwork, and then we'll head for the track. Friend of mine has a promising-looking filly going in the feature race."

"I'll amuse myself," Shaft said.

The senator headed toward the bedroom section of the suite. Shaft walked around, digging the luxurious but not ostentatious appointments of the suite. Presidents and prime ministers had walked here, probably even chased starlets around the couches. Did the secret service watch when a president was chasing pussy? How did they know he wasn't about to diddle a Vietcong booby trap? He once knew an Oriental chick who swore she got the clap from somebody who was the President of Mexico. Or maybe it was some other country.

On a telephone table, Shaft picked up a dazzling brochure displaying the luxuries available to

the hotel's guests. Underneath a photo view, his eyes caught the words, ". . . overlooking the 840 acres of New York's fabulous Central Park, the world-famous zoo, boating lakes, bridle paths, shady walks, and drives—a natural paradise by day—a quiet, leafy bower by night—."

"Oh, sure," Shaft said. It was a goddamn jungle, day or night. Was the Armand Hotel stupid enough to send its guests out to meet the friendly natives in the bushes? Come to quaint, charming Central Park. Watch the tribesmen make baskets into which they will place your head and make it disappear. See heroin sold. See indecent exposure and rape. Watch the mugging and murder near the boathouse. See the missionary position demonstrated at gunpoint and other positions the missionaries missed. Dumb assholes. Nobody in the city, black or white or purple, could enjoy the place any more.

He took out a cigarette, walked to the dining table, and picked up the senator's gold Du Pont lighter. Nothing but the best. He snicked it into flame, hefted the weight of it, and thought it too heavy. It would drag down a jacket on one side.

He walked over to a sofa, sank into its down-cushioned softness, and picked up a *Playboy*, turned to the center fold. The girl was a light-skinned black, not so pretty as Winnie Guiterrez, but with a body he imagined might be similar to Winnie's. Smallish breasts, with jelly-bean nipples, dimpled belly, long legs. He thought about the reporter and, if her ears weren't burning as the fable had it, maybe her ass was. That's what he was thinking about, anyhow.

He had called her at the office, not really expecting her or anybody to be there that early, but

she answered the phone. She was there early because she was behind schedule on an assignment. It pleased him that she didn't ask any questions about the incident at his apartment the night before. They jived around for a few moments and then he asked her if she could give him a rundown on Senator Albert Congdon Stovall, explaining why.

There wasn't too much he hadn't heard. On the lacrosse team and boxing team at Harvard. Also drama and debating. Two years at Oxford. Taught political science for two years at a small, liberal midwestern college. Narrowly squeaked into office as a county committeeman against an aging incumbent widely and strongly suspected of having his head and both hands in the pork barrel. Three years later, entered the senatorial primary as a middle-of-the-road Republican and won handily. The millions Stovall's father had made with a string of take-out barbecue stands paid for a campaign that got him elected by a narrow margin.

He emerged rather quickly as a tough politician pushing integration and minority rights at all levels, with a somewhat flamboyant, almost swashbuckling public image. His language in interviews became salty to the edge of profanity. Magazines and newspapers often found him in the photogenic company of one or another of numerous top female black entertainers. And a stunningly beautiful young Jamaican girl from a wealthy family, whom he identified as "Relatives through slavery . . . we are all cousins, like the Mafia," became his official hostess in a slightly scandalized (and envious) Washington.

He also became a hero figure to a large segment of black America, although most of the militants

thought of him as a smart-ass Charley paying lip service to black causes without getting into problems of the ghetto. Altogether, it created a pleasant kiss-my-ass notoriety and controversial behavior that appealed to a majority of his constituents, too. Stovall, they thought, don't take shit from nobody. He was elected to a second term by a considerable majority.

When Winnie finished giving Shaft that rundown, she said: "That's it from our files. Are you on twenty-four-hour duty with him?"

"I don't know yet. Why?"

"I thought maybe we might conclude *our* business, tonight."

Our business. "Yeah, the interview."

With just the right inflection to imply otherwise: "Yes, the interview."

"Uh-huh. Well, if I can tuck him in with his teddy bear early, I'll try to get away. Where can I call you later to let you know?"

"Either here or at Marilyn's. I'm having dinner with her." She gave him the number and he wrote it on a dry-cleaning receipt.

"All right, will do. Right now, I got to go."

"Me, too," she said.

Shaft fell asleep on the long sofa while Stovall dug into the mountain of paperwork he dumped from a bulging briefcase onto the huge English partners' desk in a corner of the living room.

He was awakened by Stovall's richly baritone urging him to hit the deck. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. "Big night?" Stovall asked.

"A little larger than usual. What's happening?"

"I just called the desk and said we'd be down in ten minutes. Got your wallet?"

Shaft shrugged. "I never bet."

"Of course. You're a pragmatist. I'm a plunger. All politicians are high rollers."

Shaft watched him put on a soft, light-brown canvas hat and dark glasses. He flashed the teeth at Shaft. "Still know me in a crowd?"

"Sure. That nose and that voice."

The senator made a face. "Shaft, old chap, you don't show much respect for a high-ranking member of the legislative branch."

"Oh, I respect you. But that won't keep some idiot from punching you in the nose or ventilating your head with a Saturday Night Special. You got to respect the crazies, too, or they kill you."

Stovall laughed and they went down to the garage on the private velvet-lined elevator. A big-nosed black Continental, with a white-liveried chauffer, was waiting. A ruddy-faced, middle-aged man with tufts of white hair sprouting in front of his ears, he tapped the shiny bill of his cap as he opened a rear door for them.

As the limousine glided through traffic, the senator pulled open a small bar. "Ready, yet?"

Shaft glanced at his watch. It was after twelve o'clock. "Why not? The Black Label—on some stones."

Stovall fixed Shaft a drink, made himself an all-purpose hooker of gin, and called it a martini. "You know Ben Buford?" Shaft asked.

The senator added a single drop of Bristol Cream Sherry to his martini. "We've met. We didn't get along. Hostile."

"Well, he doesn't believe in legislation. Too slow. He wants it all now. Lot of people think he's right."

"No matter how wild a cause you espouse, some people will think it's great. But realistically, I hate

to think what might happen if the revolution, as they call it, is not legislative and judicial. Ten, maybe twenty per cent of the population against the rest? Open season. They talk about keeping a piece handy. Dumb bastards. Charley's got a closetful of guns. Shoots good, too. Buford has a lot of power. I wish to Christ he wouldn't use it toward getting a lot of people killed."

"How far do you think he'd go to help his people?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you think? Would he try to get away with some kind of ripoff for financing?"

The senator drank another martini to improve his mind. "Damned if I really know," he said.

"Yeah," Shaft said.

Shaft found the racetrack amusing, especially watching the people's faces while the races were being run. All the horses looked alike to him, but the people convinced him that the sport of kings was actually the sport of greedy slobs with a thirst for self-punishment.

By the end of the fourth race, Albert Congdon Stovall hadn't had a winner. Glumly he studied the program and a racing form. "Man," he told Shaft, "you sure aren't bringing me a lot of luck. I'm a hundred in the hole, already. And it pisses me off to go home without one winner."

"You still got some races to go."

Stovall consulted his form. "This one coming up is a killer. Anything could win. . . ." He handed Shaft the program. "Pick me a horse. Anything. Just put your finger on one."

Shaft studied the program. There was a horse called Gay World. He thought about the drag

queens in the hotel elevator and stuck his fingertip over the name of that horse.

"Oh, wow. Eight to one. Why that one?"

Shaft told him about the incident in the elevator. The senator laughed and said: "The poor bastards."

Stovall summoned a clubhouse usher over to their box, gave him twenty dollars for a win bet on Gay World, number six.

The horse romped in by two and a half lengths and Stovall could hardly contain his delight. He slapped Shaft on the back, shaking his hand repeatedly. All for $175 and some change. He insisted Shaft take fifty of the money. Shaft demurred at first, but then figured what the hell—it wasn't tainted and if it made the man happy....

It was the only winner the senator had all day. Fortunately, he didn't know he was on a losing streak.

The senator took Shaft to dinner at The Four Seasons and then to a few drinks at a jazz joint in the Village where the senator exchanged autographs with Roy Eldridge. Then he told Shaft he had better get back to the hotel. He was scheduled for a television interview with a news team the next day and he wanted to go over and prepare his unrehearsed answers to the list of impromptu questions they had prepared for him.

"No sense in you hanging around," he told Shaft when they got to the hotel. "I'll call and have a security man sent up to stand outside the door. When you get off the elevator downstairs, just push the up button and when you get off it'll return up here by itself. There's no way to get it down

again, no buttons downstairs, unless I take it down. So I'll be okay."

He slapped Shaft on the shoulder. "It was a great day, brother. If you want to get here around nine in the A.M., we'll run down to the studio together, and you can watch the show live. It's only a half hour."

"Sure," Shaft said, moving out. His mind was elsewhere. With the girl. In bed. Fucking.

The only light in the room was the dim-blue candles of the streetlights on Hudson. Shaft undressed her slowly. His fingers just grazed the silk of her shoulders as he eased the Maxi off of them, let it whisper down around her feet. They trembled as he reached around and unfastened the snap of her bra. Her breasts only half-filled his hands. It was enough. The nipples, blunt and hard, seemed to respond and push against his fingers. They were seeking each other.

He looked at the little cones of flesh, tilted slightly upward, widely set on the quickening pulse of her chest. In the same second, her face was visible, turned from him, the lips slightly parted, showing a thin white line of teeth, the pretty nostrils a little flared.

This was the way she wanted to try, she said: in the dark, undressing her slowly, loving her slowly, controlled urgency, leading her very gently. And maybe that way we can make it, she said. *We*, not I, because, of course, she knew that he would make it anyhow. But it wouldn't really mean anything unless she was with him, too.

His hand moved down her rib cage to the slightly flaring hips and the cobweb silk panties and he

eased them down and off. His hands glided around to cup and fill themselves with the small firm mounds of her buttocks, smooth as sun-warmed marble.

Their mouths were open against the gentle bites of lovers' teeth and the search of tongues that wished to taste. Her hands also moved. They found the muscles of his back and arms and one then held his neck as if to achieve the impossibility of making this kiss closer.

His lips moved to the secret place at the side of her throat and his tongue touched it. He felt her tremble. Then the lobe of her ear, small pearl of flesh he tugged lightly between his lips, his heavy breathing like a warm wind on her body.

"Oh, John!" she whispered, half-moan.

His hand moved down to the silken ringlet of that moist valley where men live and die and live again. She was so ready. He half-bent and then gently lifted her into his arms, her hands locked tightly about his neck, her mouth searching for some lost treasure in the sculpture of his face.

Shaft knew, after the first few minutes she was in his apartment, that Winnie was one of those women who, at least at times, could best and most easily become aroused by talk. Talk all around it and then, finally, about it. He could see in their eyes when desire began. With the talk, he learned some things about her. She was raped when a virgin of fourteen by the manager of the apartment building where they lived at the time. She hadn't told anybody, afraid that her father would kill the man and perhaps her as well.

That had turned her off until college and a young Chicano with whom she had fallen in love. He had

been so eager a lover that the ghosts of the rape went to bed with them—and, of course, they failed.

Two other experiments after that—one white man, one black. They both tried to be patient, but it never happened and they finally gave up. She never saw them again. She knew enough to try psychotherapy, but it hadn't really helped. The psychiatrist had his fly open and was crawling onto the couch with a short, wrinkled cure in his hand when she ran out. She never sent the thirty-five dollars.

Their conversation, hers and Shaft's, finally got to this. "We've been sitting here for over an hour and you haven't touched me, or even tried me."

"It hasn't been easy," he said.

She took her full lower lip between her teeth and the almond eyes looked down a moment. They both stood, almost as if on signal and moved toward each other.

That was when she told him to turn out the light and to undress her and to be gentle. And why not? Why not, indeed.

Now he put her gently on the bed and she moved centimeters to make room for him. He stroked her as softly as a child pets a kitten—now strong, heavy hands moving across a natural work of art.

Then he was in place, entering her, and he sensed the fear suddenly reaching for her desire, felt her tighten and stiffen. He fought his own inclinations and was still. He leaned into her—motionless, but there.

After a moment, she asked, a little breathlessly, surprised: "What—what's the matter?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm just waiting for you to get used to me being there."

He didn't know how long he could take it. But it was only about a minute before sensations she had never known before moved her and she thrust up against him. And it was time.

It happened three times before they were through. In the soft hour that followed, she got up, without his asking, to get him a cigarette.

The talk in the suite was just the same crazy bullshit it had been in the bar. Cowboy started to get impatient. Okay, so this dude was putting on the straight act real big, and good at it, too, but it was boring. It was about time to force the action.

As Stovall moved to his desk to get copies of some new legislation he was sponsoring, concerning new federal housing projects for blacks in the Deep South, Cowboy excused himself to go to the bathroom.

When he returned, he was stark-naked except for a pair of brown high-heeled boots, a big-muscled, hairy-chested man, about thirty-five, half a head taller and forty pounds heavier than the senator. In his hands, he held his thick, rivet-studded belt. On his square, bulldog jaw, he wore an evil, knowing grin. His squinty little eyes gleamed.

Stovall stared at the man, stupefied, then exploded: "What the fuck *is* this? Have you gone crazy, man?"

"Yeah," Cowboy said, his voice thick with Southern accent. "Crazy to whup your black ass good, you ugly, tarbaby faggot. Then feed you a little of this." He fondled his large genitalia. "Now get your pants down, boy, and bend over a chair."

As he moved toward Stovall, the senator began

to back up, at the same time setting himself for quick defense if this idiot didn't stop.

"You'd better get *your* ass *out* of here," Stovall said. "Before I have it *thrown* out."

Cowboy laughed, an almost childish giggle. "Oh-ho! You want to get ol' Cowboy real mad first, don't you? So I'll really beat the shit out of you before I let you go down. That's the way you like it, hah?"

"You weirdo sonofabitch," Stovall told him. "I'm not taking any more of this shit. I've fought guys as big as you before. You got about three seconds to take that elevator down out of here before I knock you on your ass and drag you into it."

Cowboy nodded, grinning. "Sure. Come on, nigger-boy." He stuck out his big jaw. "Here, take a poke. Hit me, spade. Get me *real* good and pissed off."

In his college boxing-team stance, Stovall charged at the bigger man, fury displacing the fear he'd first felt. He was faster than Cowboy figured and the blow glanced off Cowboy's suddenly upthrust arm and struck his broad nose with enough power in it to draw a trickle of blood, bringing stinging tears to Cowboy's eyes.

The big man caught the right that followed on the palm of his hand, grabbed Stovall's wrist, twisted, brought Stovall's arm up over his shoulder from behind, put his hip into it, and somersaulted the senator onto the flat of his back.

"You crazy coon sonofabitch, you weren't supposed to really hit me. Now I've *got* to kick the shit out of you."

Stovall with both hands tried to stave off one of the boots Cowboy had put back on after dis-

robing, but the stomp smashed right through them, caught him in the liver with the raised, steel-studded heel. Just before he passed out, the senator hoped the guard outside would hear the commotion and come in.

The entire suite, including the steel door to the stairway, was soundproofed.

It was almost an hour later before Senator Albert Congdon Stovall was able to crawl to the door, claw his way half-upright, and throw the bolts open. The security guard, leaning against the door, sleeping on his feet, almost fell in on top of the slumped, once-again unconscious wreck inside the room.

Shaft and Winnie were dozing in the darkness when the pounding on the front door sounded. He picked up a terry robe, struggled against inside-out sleeves, and went grumbling out of the room. He shut the bedroom door, snicked on a living-room lamp, and went to the door. "Yeah?"

"Anderozzi," the voice told him.

Shaft slipped the bolts, opened the door. "I'm looking for a schmuck named Shaft."

"It takes one to find one."

"Want you to take a run over to the hospital with me."

"It's a little late for brain surgery. I only do appendixes and circumcisions after midnight."

"To have a talk with the man you're supposed to be protecting instead of being here fucking some dumb broad." Shaft felt the bottom drop out of his stomach, if not his sex life.

"The senator? What happened to him?"

"Stomped. Whipped. Brutalized. Some rough-

trade sadist. You coming or you gonna continue your fan dance?"

"Rough trade? Stovall's straight! Straighter than you are."

"Who says I'm straight? People'll tell you I been a faggot for years. . . . And the hospital will tell you there's semen as well as blood all over Stovall's shirt."

"Oh, *shit!*" Shaft said. He had rather liked Stovall, a pragmatic man with a sense of style. Not his own, but style. And now this.

"I'll wait downstairs in the car. He won't talk to anybody but you. Maybe he thinks you'll understand better." Anderozzi found himself amusing, although it didn't show. And Shaft found himself very angry—resentful—as if he had somehow been betrayed.

He didn't stop to reason it out. He slammed the door and ran back to the bedroom. "I've got to leave. Friend of mine got hurt. In the hospital." He scooped up his clothes, started out, to get dressed in the living room.

"Will you be long?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Is—is it all right if I stay here?"

He looked at her and nodded. If he had a choice, he didn't want it.

4

Riding uptown and crosstown to the small private East Side hospital, Anderozzi stopped clowning and got serious. The Armand Hotel would keep it quiet; who wanted this sort of publicity? The police would try to do the same and probably succeed if somebody could get Stovall's wallet back. It was fat full of credit cards. They had checked out the suite and that was the only thing they thought was missing. It also had several hundred dollars in cash in it.

"You got a name? Anything?"

"Not for sure. The name he gave the senator was probably a phony. Later, he referred to himself as Cowboy. All those assholes are cowboys."

Shaft shook his head. "How'd the sonofabitch get up there?"

"Stovall wouldn't tell, kept saying he wanted to talk with you. Before he passed out again."

"How bad off is he?"

"Ruptured spleen, a little liver damage, one broken rib, one cracked, a face that looks like he tried to kiss a radiator fan and some belt marks."

"That's not rough trade. Most they'd do is step on the faggot's balls or whip his ass some."

"Usually. Maybe the senator bit him."

Cute again. The prick. Shaft held his anger down.

"The guy white?"

"Yeah—and smart enough to probably know he can cop a plea by protesting that he was only warding off improper sexual advances."

They were silent in a moment of truth.

"You know," Anderozzi said, looking out at a city that no longer existed except in his memory as a cop, "fifteen years ago, maybe ten, I'd go out and find the scummy bastard myself; I'd take him over to the river, cut the Achilles tendons in both his ankles, and push him in."

"Goddamn," Shaft said. "Only a mean Guinea would do that."

"Yeah," Anderozzi said. "And enjoy every minute of it. So what about Ben Buford?"

"What about him?"

"You better get to him soon. Somebody called downtown—anonymous, naturally—and gave the word that Buford makes his big hit Friday."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe Buford's being set for a frame?"

"Sure. But it's also possible the silly bastard has made so many enemies somebody is telling the truth to get him nailed. It ain't gonna hurt to talk to him."

"I put the word out," Shaft said. "He'll get in touch."

Anderozzi was wrong. Albert Congdon Stovall didn't look like a man who kissed radiator fans. He looked worse. But the attending physician assured Shaft that it would all settle back into place with some cosmetic surgery and care against infection. Still, Shaft winced. He had given some beatings and taken some. But this was superior work. Jesus. It hurt to look.

"He referred to himself as Cowboy?" Shaft asked.

The battered head nodded almost imperceptibly.

"You believed this shit—this Southern Whites For Racial Justice? He really told you that?"

"It seemed to make sense at the time," Stovall hissed through loose front teeth.

"You pay me a lot of money to protect your ass all day long and most of the night and, as soon as I'm gone, you run down to the hotel bar on a message about southern whites. Are you crazy?"

"Shaft?"

"What?"

"Can we keep the . . . the fag part quiet? Just say I got mugged?"

There were tears in his eyes. It must be agony to even talk like this.

"I don't know. Maybe. You answer me one thing. The truth. You shit me and I find out—and I *will* find out—I'll ruin you. All I want is the truth and I don't really care either way, but I have a reason for wanting to know."

"Okay."

"*Are* you a closet queen? Is that why you brought that motherfucker up to your suite?"

"Oh, shit, Shaft—you should know better."

What he said, and the way he said it, Shaft believed.

Drake didn't like being awakened at 3:00 A.M. Especially not by Shaft. He wasn't about to tell him which one of the bellhops on duty that night might be queer. And no, he hadn't noticed anyone of Cowboy's description hanging around the bar. He hadn't even known that Senator Stovall had been down there.

"Okay, you small-time gumshoe prick," Shaft said. "So I go to the newspapers and tell them what happened. *The Times* will be respectful—but watch out for *The Daily News.*"

Well, it seemed there was a bellhop who might be a little gay, named Billie Yeats. It also seemed that, yes, he had been the one who got Cowboy's message to Stovall's suite, and split his tip with the guard to get him to give the note to the senator. Drake grumbled all the way down to his office where he looked up Yeats's address for Shaft.

It took three rings of the bell on the door of the basement apartment in the East Fifty-sixth Street brownstone before a sleepy querulous voice asked: "Who's there?"

In a swishy tone, Shaft said: "Just me, Billie, baby. Open up. I've got big news."

The door eased open to the limit of its chain lock. A rather too-pretty face, under a shock of tousled black hair, looked out. Before he realized that he didn't know Shaft and slammed the door in his face, Shaft rammed it with his shoulder. The chain lock tore off a strip of molding, the door swung all the way in, and Billie Yeats hit the floor. Yelping. Shaft grabbed a handful of hair, lifted him off the floor, and dropped him in a big leather chair across the room.

"You scream or holler," Shaft said. "And the only thing you get to suck for six months is a hospital thermometer. Cowboy. I want to find Cowboy."

"I—please don't hurt me—honestly! I—I don't know!"

Oh, well. . . . Shaft reached down and stuck his forefinger in Billie's ear, clamped the thumb, and

pulled upward. The bellhop tried to scream, but not much sound came out.

Shaft said: "I can turn you into a stone post in two minutes, asshole. I want the address and fast while you can still hear me."

He turned loose. Billie Yeats slumped with a sob, clutching at the agony of his head—and blurted out an address on the West Side.

"Last name," Shaft said. "His last name."

"Doheny. Dirk Doheny. Oh, God, you won't tell him I told you. Please."

"Sure I will," Shaft said. "It may be the start of your greatest romance."

Shaft looked around. There was a closet in the corner and he tucked Billie Yeats into it among the plastic garment bags.

"When's the maid come?"

"Two days! Day after tomorrow!" Billie whispered.

"That's good," Shaft said, closing the door and locking it.

The super of the building was thin, rheumy-eyed, in his fifties, and with the stink of cheap wine on his breath strong enough to wrinkle a nose at six feet.

"Sorry to get you up," Shaft said, smiling, talking fast, holding out the ten-dollar bill. "Doheny —Dirk Doheny—asked me to pick up a package he left in his apartment. He said you'd give me a key."

The rumdum stared at the tenspot, looked up into Shaft's bland, friendly expression. "I thought I saw him come in a while ago," the super said.

"Yeah, but he had to go right out again. That's why he forgot the package. Man, I'm doing him a big favor."

He then gave the same rough description of Cowboy that he had gotten from Stovall to prove he knew the man.

That did it. The man grabbed the ten, went in and got a key, and handed it to Shaft.

It was an old building, but well kept. Doheny's apartment was on the third floor. Shaft put his ear against the door. No sound, no TV, no nothing. Maybe the sonofabitch wasn't even home yet. Or he could be sleeping already.

The key went into the lock quietly and the door opened smoothly. Darkness and silence. Shaft congratulated himself on locking the faggot in the closet. He might even go let him out later. For the moment, he concentrated on slipping to one side of the door—out of the light that made him such a perfect target.

He eased the door shut, then leaned back, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom. A mean prick like this Cowboy would probably keep a piece in the house. But where? Suddenly a sound of snoring came from the right. Shaft moved carefully through the darkness toward the sound. Gently, he pulled the bedroom door to. Then he switched on a small lamp near a desk, poised, waiting to move if the sound of snoring was interrupted. It wasn't. Sleeping like an innocent walrus, the miserable, sadistic freak. Just shows you what a clear conscience can do for you.

He searched the living room with the care and attention of a surgical nurse counting sponges. No gun. But he kept going and he was just about to conclude that this red-neck motherfucker probably kept it under his pillow, when he found it. But of course. Doesn't everyone keep a .38 Police Positive in an empty canister on the kitchen shelf?

Shaft heard the sound of air moving behind him one hundredth of a second before the big ham-slice of hand started toward the back of his neck. He bent and ducked. The breeze from the blow ruffled his hair and the hand hit the door of a kitchen cabinet, splintering the wood. Shaft struck out with the .38 and the barrel and the sight notch made a red streak down one side of Cowboy's ugly face. There was surprise and shock on the other side. Before he could recover from that, Shaft flipped the revolver and caught it by the barrel and brought the heavy butt in a quick smash against Cowboy's forehead. The man dropped as though he'd been kissed with a four-pound spike hammer. He covered half the kitchen floor with twitching muscles and Shaft was somehow surprised to note that the big reb wore pink polka-dot pajamas. The job was getting to Cowboy, he thought; Cowboy would be lisping before long. The gash down his cheek added additional polka dots. Shaft broke open the gun, saw that it was loaded with soft-nosed slugs. Naturally.

He took a pan from the side of the sink, filled it with cold water, and sloshed it full into Cowboy's gape-mouthed face. The eyes opened and the head came up and the mouth spluttered and then stayed open as he stared at the muzzle of the .38, almost touching one of his eyeballs.

"Hello, sissy," Shaft greeted him. He figured Cowboy for having done some time in the Joint, where sissy was the worst of names. Cowboy twitched.

Shaft ripped open the other cheek with the sight notch. Just a little whiplash with a twist of peel.

"Oh, goddamn," Cowboy moaned. "You're blinding me."

"Yeah," Shaft said. "That's what I'm doing. Listen, you ever seen a man shot in the kneecap with a soft-nosed slug like you got here?" He watched the fear grow behind the pain. "No leg. No leg at all. Takes it right off. Ready?"

"Look, man." Cowboy cringed. "Look, what do you want? Anything. Take it. Look there's even——"

"Yeah, there's even the senator's wallet and cards. Where are they?"

A pause, long enough to determine how many places a nose can be broken with the toe of a shoe.

Through the blood, cartilage, and whatever else was pouring out of his head, the sadist gasped: "Under the mattress."

Shaft kicked him and heard ribs crack. "Get up and show me. I play your game pretty good, don't I? Move."

Cowboy crawled. He managed to get to his feet, fell twice going through the living room, into the bedroom, trailing blood. Shaft turned on lights as they went. From the corners of his eyes as he kept the gun leveled at Cowboy, Shaft saw on a dresser several statues of nude, youthful males. On one wall was a huge blow-up of a photograph of two men engaged in a homosexual act.

Cowboy reached under the mattress, came out with the wallet. "Drop it on the floor and get on the bed. Face down," Shaft told him.

He picked up the wallet, checked the credit-card section, which was still intact. There was also a sheaf of bills in the money section. Shaft stuck the wallet into his left hip pocket. Cowboy was groaning and peeking at him fearfully, one arm thrown up over his head.

"You're a real tough sonofabitch, aren't you?" Shaft said. "Who put you on to Stovall?"

Cowboy was whining now. "He—he hit me, that was all, got—got me mad. Almost killed me."

"Sure he did. Who put you on to him?"

"I don't—don't know who it was. They—he—just phoned me and told me about him, described him, and told me I could pick him up in the hotel lobby or the bar."

"And you don't know who that was?"

"No. I swear. They didn't give no name, just the information, and then hung up. So—so it wasn't really my fault."

Shaft sighed. "All you did was put him in the hospital, rip off his wallet, maybe destroyed his reputation. A man you never saw before in your life, who never did you any harm. You'd make Hitler puke."

Shaft snatched a pillow from the bed as Cowboy started to come up off the bed screaming, covered the muzzle of the revolver, and pulled the trigger. The sound was bigger than a breadbox slamming shut, but smaller than a television sound. The bullets really were soft; the pillow barely covered the holes—coming and going—in Cowboy Doheny. Shaft wiped his own prints from the gun, and wrapped Doheny's limp fingers around the butt, placing the index finger on the trigger.

There was an envelope in the desk, a long brown one. In block letters, Shaft printed on it: "FOR THE IMMEDIATE ATTENTION OF CAPTAIN ANDEROZZI, NYPD."

On his way home, he stopped into a precinct house and dropped it in the departmental mailbox.

It was a tick away from 6:00 A.M. when Shaft trudged into his own apartment, feeling as if he'd been chopping cotton. The first thing he saw was something that looked like a six-and-a-half-foot black grasshopper on the living-room chair. Elbows, knees, shoulders, and big feet were sticking out at all angles. The gold-rimmed glasses had slipped down almost to the tip of the nose. Bushy black hair, tightly, naturally curly, framed the long, thin, sensitive face. Heavily hooded, widely set brown eyes opened and stared at Shaft a moment, over the top of the specs, then closed again.

"So," Shaft said. "The new Messiah of the bedbug set is honoring me with his presence."

No response.

"Who let you in?"

Eyes still closed. "Who else? The chick. Hello, Charley."

"How about CeeCee?" Shaft said. "You could rub Shinola on that chick for a week and she'd have still come up white. How's that cut in with you and the other racial purists?"

The eyes came open and stared balefully at Shaft. "Fuck you. She don't win any Miss Kenya contests, but she believes!" The voice was beautiful; Shaft liked to listen to it even spouting such horseshit. "She put her money where her mouth is."

Shaft laughed. "Then she must have carried around ten-dollar bills in her pussy."

The interruption was ignored. "Her old man gave her five thousand to tour Europe for the summer. She gave it all to us."

"Except for a few hundred to feed her habit for a week, maybe," Shaft shot in.

"That's more than I can say for some mother-

fuckers I know, who wouldn't lay down a dime to help their brothers out of the ghetto."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Ben," Shaft cut him off sharply, wearily. "Save that shit for the whistle-stop coeds who cream their jeans counting zipper notches on your fly."

"Not only that," Buford went on. "When Cee-Cee fucks, it's not because the man's white, black, brown, whatever, not because he's handsome, rich, musclebound, or influential."

"You sure don't fit most of those last categories, Great Black Father. . . ."

"And if she was hooked on shit," Buford persisted, "maybe it was because she couldn't take what she saw going on."

"Yeah," Shaft said, yawning. "When'd you last see her?"

Buford unhinged his long, awkwardly impressive body from the chair, and stood up. "I thought you wanted to see me about something important. You just want to put down some little chick. I'm splitting."

"It's nothing *really* important," Shaft said. "Just your skinny black ass. That's all. Go ahead and split."

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about. I don't even spit on the frigging sidewalk. I'm clean."

"Maybe that's what's got them worried. You've been too quiet."

"The time will come," Buford said broodingly.

"They figure they got some people of yours in the slammer that you want out."

"They always have some of the brothers in jail."

"And you need a lot of long bread to spring them."

"Come on, Shaft. I got to get back on a plane and out of this fucked-up city."

"Answer my question. The last time you were with CeeCee?"

Buford's great coat-hanger shoulders hunched. "Maybe a month or so. I been out of town about that long."

"That's not what some hooker friend of hers told me. She saw you with CeeCee in a place called Stewie's, only a few days before she got busted."

"She got busted? For what?"

"Possession. She got busted, bailed out, and dead. All within a couple of days."

The blank, uncomprehending way Buford looked at him Shaft was pretty sure was no act. He pushed it: "She got fixed with an OD and the ones that did it left her here for me to find. With a message telling me to fuck off. Tonight, a guy I'm supposed to be guarding gets stomped half to death by some big rough-trade type, who got a mysterious phone call that my client was a faggot. I don't like all this shit, Ben. Maybe you ought to tell me about it."

The shoulders again. "What's to tell?"

"What kind of a ripoff are you and your dumb friends planning for Friday night? And where?"

Buford stared at him and then broke out into wild laughter that ended as suddenly as it had started. "Oh, shit, Shaft. You've got hit on the head once too often. You been scrambled."

"Then Anderozzi got hit with the same hammer. *He* thinks it's coming and you're it. He got the first message from CeeCee out of some routine questions about your activities while they teased her with a spike she needed. That's what she laid on them. Then Anderozzi gets an anonymous phone

tip that this half-million heist is coming down Friday night."

Buford didn't say anything. Instead he walked out into the kitchen and began making coffee with Shaft's bean grinder and Chemex. "Why don't you keep a jar of instant around?" he said. "You must jack off over this routine."

Shaft had followed him out there. "Listen, asshole, I want some answers and right now."

Buford wheeled on him, a vein standing out like a worm at his temple. The big, gangling body braced itself, the bony fists clenched. Very low, he said: "Don't push me."

Shaft chuckled. "When you going to learn you're a lover, not a fighter? You'll get killed someday throwin' down on people."

Buford untensed and went back to making the coffee. After a moment, he said, "Just tell your pig friend that the movement doesn't *need* any half million that bad. When we're ready to go for that kind of loot, we'll take it all."

"Sure. Meanwhile, Anderozzi is into this heist story about you because he knows how bad you want your friends out on the street. Ain't nobody who'd trust you for the bail."

"We're getting the money other ways. If it takes a little time, what's the difference? Maybe my people can do more good inside than out."

"That figures," Shaft said. "First they get their silly asses busted for fucking up outside, then they get inside where they make great targets. Ain't no place to run in a cell."

"There's no sense even trying to talk to you," Buford told him. He poured himself a cup of coffee and stood by the window drinking it, looking down

at the August morning heat almost visibly rising from the pavement.

"You're not talking *with* me," Shaft answered. "I'm telling *you*, trying to cram something into your fucked-up head. If you're leveling, then somebody's trying to frame you good. And maybe get away with it, too."

"And maybe it's just some bullshit joke. The whole thing."

"Bullshit joke. You dumb bastard, if you *haven't* seen CeeCee in a month, how come she was around with some creep that apparently looks like you—and, Christ knows, where the fuck did they find somebody like *that?* Maybe she was paid to get herself busted, so she could rap to the Man about your plans. Is it a joke that somebody gave a black pimp twenty-five hundred to bail her ass out? Or that a couple of pushers got paid to give her an OD and plant her in my flat? Nothing in the fucking world's that funny. Joke, your ass!"

Buford drained the last of his coffee out of the cup, put it down on the sink sideboard.

"*Wash* the goddamned cup. You used it."

A quick, crooked grin twisted a corner of Buford's usually stern mouth. "You want me to get dishwater hands? Let your Polack housekeeper do it, you're such a big shot. You're paying her."

Shaft shook his head. "I don't believe you."

"All right," Buford said wearily, yawning. "What am I supposed to do?"

Shaft pointed his finger, wagging it right under Buford's long, ascetic nose. "What you're s'pose to *do*, is get your dumb ass to Los Angeles or Seattle or Hong Kong. On Friday, you invite the police department and the district attorney to a meeting on peaceful co-existence or the high price of pussy

—anything you can think of—and talk to them all night."

"I don't talk to people like that," Buford said.

Shaft's jaw dropped. "You don't talk to people like that! Every time you wipe your ass, you probably rub across three listening devices planted on you by the CIA and the FBI. You talk to 'em every day—one way or another. But they don't talk to each other when it comes to helping you. So do it. *And do it in public.* Jesus, are you dumb."

As the door closed on Buford, the bone-weariness hit Shaft like a meat cleaver. He had to crash. His eyelids felt as though they were holding up one corner of a Cadillac for a tire change. He stumbled toward the bedroom, forgetting all about Winifred Guiterrez.

Then the bedroom door opened and he practically bumped into her. Sleepy-eyed as a child, wearing one of his shirts as a nightgown. He groaned silently. There was only so much a man could ask of himself in one day or night, he thought.

And then he asked for just a little more.

Jeff Bigger, the lockman, had a two-bedroom apartment in a big Whitestone project. His wife and little girl were at Asbury Park on vacation. Wickman, Yancey, and the others met there just before noon on Friday. Donny Graycoff brought the costumes, make-up, and wigs. With small adjustments, the fittings were perfect. Jeff Bigger had checked out the Hotel Armand's safe-deposit-box vault.

He said: "It's pretty much of a creampuff. There's like maybe four hundred boxes and from what I could get, about two hundred of them are empty. So we shake them to see and get rid of them

right away. That leaves about two hundred. I figure about thirty seconds for each lock. Roughly, that's an hour and a half's work."

Yancey said: "Why do we have to go through all that? What about that little faggot bellhop, Billie Yeats? What has he done for us to earn his two hundred? Why can't he get at the registration books, give us the names of everybody coming in from Vegas. There shouldn't be that many. Save a bitch of a lot of time."

"The only thing wrong," Wickman told him, "is, first, Shaft got to Yeats for a line on Cowboy. *That* dumb mother worked over the senator too much. The little queen's so scared he doesn't want any part of it. He isn't even going back to that hotel to work. Second, you don't think those guys from Vegas, coming in with the skim money, are going to use their right names or even put down Vegas on the card. No way. We have to do it the hard way and it takes a couple of hours—so what? We can hold things under control that long."

Wickman paced up and down, scratching his clipped white mustache with the nail of his forefinger. "Okay. The Drag Queen Ball starts at nine P.M. By ten, it should be well under way. Let's make it ten-thirty. So we go into the vault about nine. We've already worked out with Bigger the way we do that. Everybody got it straight? So at eight-thirty, we all meet in the room Bigger has at the hotel. Put on all the junk we're going to wear and go downstairs at nine. Let's not forget some of the little details I mentioned earlier, like shaving your arms, legs, and chest. When we make the exit, we don't want some dumb security guard pointing and saying 'Hey, that's not one of them, with all that body hair on him!' You dig?"

They all nodded. They left Bigger's apartment one by one, at fifteen-minute intervals, carrying in big boxes their gowns, wigs, make-up, and the pieces Andy LeDuc had contributed.

The young assistant district attorney, crew-cut hair, lean jaw and steely cold eyes, was obviously much impressed with his own job. He was also much disturbed over the way things had been handled.

"But Captain Anderozzi," he insisted, "why *hasn't* a homicide report on this been filed in our office?"

"Because there wasn't any. No homicide, that is."

"Oh, come on, Captain, you don't really buy that any more than I do. No man commits suicide by shooting himself in the genitals after beating himself up."

"Maybe he was very unhappy with the problems they caused him. Two years ago, we had a case where a fruit cut his whang off with a carving knife and bled to death. Who the hell knows why these crazy bastards do anything?"

"All right, what about the pillow, then? A guy's going to kill himself, why worry about muffling the sound of the shot?"

Anderozzi picked at his front teeth with a thumbnail, stared blandly at the assistant DA. "It's a little late to ask him. Maybe he just couldn't stand loud noises. Or didn't want to awaken the neighbors. Suicides are very considerate. They try to be neat."

The DA didn't actually say shit, but the look on his face did. "And the super of the building who got conned into giving Doheny's key to a man who

fits the description of a private investigator named Shaft, who was recommended by the police department to bodyguard Senator Stovall, who earlier in the evening was stomped very badly by the deceased Doheny? What about all those coincidences, Captain?"

"Did we ever find that key? No. Is the super an alky who admits he was drinking very heavily that night? Yes. Do we put much stock in the rantings of a drunken apartment-house super who might have dreamed or imagined the whole thing or might just be hoping to get himself some stupid notoriety? Of course we don't."

The assistant DA didn't say anything.

"You really don't buy it, do you?" Anderozzi asked.

"Hell, no. I think the whole thing's a whitewash for your man Shaft."

"Not *my* man, feller. And me, I buy what I'm told to buy. Maybe you should do the same. Look, we got the senator's wallet back, didn't we? That saves everybody grief. You have more questions, call the commissioner. I've got work to do. Nice talking to you."

As the young DA left, Anderozzi thought about Shaft. Just because the pushers who killed the little girl and the sadist who brutalized homosexuals were vermin, scum, cancers in the human condition, and, as such, very much deserved to die, how could he, a cop, let the big ape get away with it? You just can't do that kind of thing. Jesus, there's laws and courts and prisons. There's an established order. There's rules and regulations.

And there's also Shaft.

5

Cyrus Creighton, executive manager of the Hotel Armand, was a short man with thinning sandy hair, horn-rimmed spectacles, a round little paunch, and the smug conviction of command in possibly the most elegant of the string of hotels along prestigious Central Park South. Heaven and all would be well forever and ever. It had been for more than five years, until the night before last.

Creighton still suffered recurring shock, thinking about it. It couldn't possibly have happened. Yet it had. He'd seen the black man, lying there unconscious, the condition of his face, all that blood on his shirt. And a United States Senator, at that. In the Presidential Suite.

He had seen worse, of course, back when he was young, desk-clerking in hot-sheet joints, working his way through the university's course in restaurant, hotel, and motel management. But you expected it in places like that. Never in the Hotel Armand. Someone had dropped a water-filled condom out of one of the windows once. It was the same thing. Incongruous, shocking, in this grand place.

Of course, Senator Stovall was a gentleman of color, as they say. Creighton had nothing against blacks who had made something of themselves. Some of the others were different. Some of the

show-business ones and the sports stars, with their brooding arrogance, just because they'd been born lucky enough to be able to sing or dance or act, throw a football or a baseball. *They* didn't have any class, to Creighton's way of thinking, but you couldn't refuse them if they could pay the bill.

Cyrus Creighton was very concerned with class. He liked to think that he had class. And of course *his* hotel had class. So how had that terrible thing with the senator happened? Thank God, the police had chosen to keep it quiet. He shuddered, hating to think what might have happened if Stovall had died from his injuries. He wondered briefly if the carpet people would be able to get the bloodstains out or if all-new carpeting would have to be laid.

Creighton wished that effeminate bellhop, Keats or Yeats or whatever his name was, the one apparently responsible for the whole mess, had tried to come back to work. There were few things Creighton liked more than personally firing negligent or incompetent employees. There had been some compensation, of course, in chewing out Drake. But not enough.

Nursing a Harvey's Bristol Cream Sherry over one cube of ice—Creighton's only form of alcoholic indulgence; two, never more than three a night—he contemplated the navel of some of his occupational problems. He made little mental notes to himself. If there were any more complaints about the laundering of linen, get a new linen service. Fire the desk clerk who was insolent today to Mrs. Frisby, who was a first-class pain in the ass. Old Mrs. Frisby had lived in the hotel for three years and had eleven million dollars. Have extra desk help on hand tomorrow at checkout time. The Congress of GAY was leaving. Thank God!

If it had been up to him, he would have made that crazy bunch of homosexuals go to the nearest Hilton or some other place. It hadn't been up to him. One of the owners of the Armand was a member of the organization. Congress of Gay American Youth, indeed. Why, some of their members were as old as he was. Not that forty-six was old, really; anyone on the sunny side of fifty wasn't old. But he wasn't exactly a rosy-cheeked boy, either. Nor were a lot of the old queens who were staying at the hotel as part of the convention.

Creighton sometimes wondered what actually went on with these people. Not exactly what . . . but who *did* what to whom?

His own tastes were distinctly masculine, he thought. He liked little girls on the threshold of puberty, and had flown as far as Tangier to realize his fantasies. He might just go back this year on his annual two-week vacation.

These were Creighton's evening thoughts while he sipped his sherry.

Creighton got in and out of the shower in the usual manner and was about to go into the bedroom to read himself to sleep when he thought he heard a sound from the door of his suite. He started toward the little entranceway-hall area and then stopped as two fearsome apparitions suddenly emerged into his sitting room.

Creighton didn't believe it. He actually thought in his moment of fear that his mind had snapped under the weight of his awesome responsibility. No such luck.

There was what looked to be a very tall black scarecow wearing shocking-pink hotpants, pantyhose, and pink high-heeled slippers. The mouth

was garishly overpainted in vermilion. Red poker chips of rouge stood out against the brown hollows under the high cheekbones. Covering the eyes was an enormous pair of spectacles, the rims trimmed with what looked like black daisy petals. The wig was done in a tightly curled Afro style suitable for either a man or a woman. It was carrying an ugly-looking revolver with a short, wide-mouthed barrel.

The other one wasn't extremely short, but merely looked that way by comparison. This pudgy body was encased in a high-fashion evening gown so tight that the padded bra looked like a weightlifter's exercise dumbell. The shoes were royal-blue clogs. This one wore a blonde wig and it sat upon his head at a slightly cockeyed, rakish angle. Sunglasses, sprouting enormous fake eyelashes, perched on his blunt black nose. His female make-up was by Revlon out of Halloween.

This one was carrying a short shotgun, the barrel and part of the stock cut off.

They weren't wearing perfume, but the costumes reeked of it from former users. Cyrus Creighton suddenly realized they were real when he smelled the perfume. He said: "What—what are you doing in here? How did you get in?"

"We flew in," the tall black scarecrow said. It looked as though two grapefruit had been stuffed into the bodice of his blouse.

"You—uh—men, uh, better get out of here. You've got the wrong room, I guess." He made a shooing motion with his small pale hands.

"No wrong room, dad," the smaller one said. He stepped toward Creighton and poked the end of the shotgun into his paunch. "This little stovepipe will

take out half of your belly if it goes off. Just do as you're told and you'll be all right. Now turn around."

Creighton turned around. This wasn't a joke. These men were evil, he suddenly knew. They were up to something terrible. He felt as though if this didn't stop happening in another moment or so, he would have to cry. Creighton hadn't cried since he was eleven years old.

"Get over to the phone and call Drake," one of them said from behind him. "Tell him to get his ass up here to your suite."

"Drake?" Creighton whimpered.

The nose of the sawed-off shotgun was hard against the bone in his spine.

"You heard him," Donny Graycoff said. "Get the motherfucker up here. You give any hint there's anything wrong, he'll find you here dead."

Cyrus Creighton was already dead; he just didn't know it yet.

After Creighton had summoned Drake and set down the telephone again, Andy LeDuc spun him around. He stepped back so that the muzzle of the gun was about a foot away from Creighton's belly. The robe had flopped open, but Creighton didn't notice. He was staring at the gun, his jaw gaping on the loose hinges of panic and terror.

He never heard the blast, as his small, soft body redecorated the suite.

"Christ!" Graycoff said, looking down on him. "I think he's dead." Men say foolish things to death, which ignores them and goes its way.

The guests of honor at the Congress of GAY Grand Ball were a couple who had been married. As would be reported later, in the association's

very own magazine, "The bride was radiantly beautiful in white Chantilly lace, auburn curls framing her face. The bridegroom chose a white tuxedo, lace dickey, and matching cuffs. It was the first marriage for both."

The hundred members of the congress who attended applauded as the couple led off the dancing with a waltz. Standing near the buffet, a tall redhead, resplendent in an off-the-shoulder spangled gown, said to his companion: "I give it three months and one cruise up Third Avenue."

"Bitchy, bitchy, bitchy," the other replied.

With heavily ringed fingers gracefully dipping punch from the bowl into a glass, a shingled blonde in gold lamé chattered to a bored-looking weightlifter whose overdeveloped musculature strained the fake leopard-skin leotard worn under a white cape.

Edging away, he said: "See you later, Irving."

"Janice, goddamnit," the blonde hissed. "Janice!"

Near the door, two uniformed special-security guards watched as the bride and groom finished the waltz and other couples quickly filled the floor.

The big, grizzled-looking cop, with a pot that made him look three months' pregnant, said sideways to the younger, skinny one: "You ever see so many ugly cocksuckers in your whole life?"

The young one covered his chagrin by picking his teeth with a matchbook cover. Ugly? Who was so ugly?

Andy LeDuc borrowed Graycoff's Smith and Wesson, screwed the tube of the silencer onto the muzzle and took Drake out with one neat hole in the back of the head. He explained to Graycoff.

"That other thing's too noisy. And messy. Man, is it messy!" He smiled. Some of the lipstick had smeared onto his square white teeth.

LeDuc went to the linen closet down the hall. They rolled first Creighton and then Drake into sheets and lugged them one by one to the laundry chute and wedged the bodies into it, listening briefly to the sound they made sliding down. The laundry room wouldn't be open until eight o'clock the next morning.

In the lobby, Donny Graycoff waited until the night desk clerk checked in a middle-aged couple, then proceeded to distract his attention so that LeDuc could let himself into Creighton's office with one of the keys they'd taken from him.

The clerk was a silver-haired elderly man with veiny cheeks and a perpetually down-pulled thin mouth, always wishing, no matter what time it was, that in a minute it would be twelve o'clock and he could get out of this fucking place and back to his room to drink himself to sleep. Oh, shit! Now what did this long-john toothpick nigger faggot want? The kind of creeps you run into in the hotel business nowadays. The sonofabitch should be out collecting garbage somewhere instead of cluttering up the lobby.

"Yes—uh—sir?" the clerk said.

Donny Graycoff gave him his version of the deep, musically-toned Ben Buford's voice. He figured this dumb little shit would remember that for the police.

"I have a problem." He pointed toward a plump, blue-gray-haired lady, who looked like a private-girls'-school principal on vacation, across the lobby. She was reading a magazine. "I don't quite know

how to phrase this without being vulgar," Graycoff went on, "but while I was in the *men's* room, that old bitch took my purse. Can you imagine! And she doesn't even belong in there—in the men's room. She's *not* one of us."

You sonofabitch, the clerk said to himself. If *I* went into a men's room and *you* were there it would be the last time; I'd piss in the manager's watchpocket before I went back.

The clerk stared at the old lady, then looked back to Graycoff. "That woman?" he said. "Are you certain?"

"Am I sure? Do you think I'd lie about a thing like that? You want me to cross my heart and hope to die?"

Looking at the huge carrying bag looped over Graycoff's skinny shoulder, the clerk said: "But you're wearing your bag."

"Not this one, goose," Graycoff said. "It was another one." He glanced around and saw that LeDuc was safely inside Creighton's office. He told the clerk: "Oh, never mind, you old auntie, I'll just report it to the FBI."

The clerk watched him swish away and scratched his head. Nutty as a fruitcake. Fruity as a nutcake. How did they get that way?

Inside Creighton's wood-and-leather-decorated office, LeDuc found the front-desk registration transcripts for the last three days. Using the gold pen from Creighton's desk stand, he jotted down on Creighton's personal memo pad the last names of male guests who had checked in Wednesday. That was the day that dumb sonofabitch Wickman said that the men from Vegas would arrive. Graycoff was smart, and absolutely right that it was

stupid to waste so much time when Bigger could get the thing done this way in half the time or less.

LeDuc chuckled. Poor Wickman and his jerky friend, Yancey; it had been nice of them, though, to set the rest of the heist up for them so sweetly. He stuck the list in his handbag and at the same moment heard the sound of a key turning in the door. Shit, why hadn't they realized that there'd be an assistant manager on night duty? And the mother would pick this moment to come back from dinner or wherever the hell he had been. LeDuc leaped into position so that the door would hide him when it opened and at the same time drew the shotgun from his bag.

The barrel cracked behind the head of the night manager and he went down onto his knees, then sprawled forward on his face. LeDuc kicked the door shut, straddled the prone man, and brought the butt of the shotgun down onto the back of the man's neck four times before he heard the spinal cord crack and the sigh of the man as he died.

Well, LeDuc thought, that was one more that wouldn't be interfering with their work. As he stepped out of the office, just in case the desk clerk was watching, he nodded and smiled, said: "Yes, sir. And thank you very much, Mr. Creighton."

The clerk was watching. Creighton? What was the old fart doing in his office this time of night? The clerk always knew there was something freaky about that stuffy sonofabitch.

LeDuc waved a signal for Donny Graycoff to get on the house phone to Bigger. They were ready to roll.

In room four-twenty-six, Neal Wickman paced up and down nervously. He had shaved his mus-

tache, blackened his brows. A long black wig flowing to his shoulders covered his white hair. A miniskirted green dress exposed his knobby knees and shaven, slightly bowed legs. The women's shoes he was wearing pinched his feet.

"Where's that crazy Graycoff? And LeDuc? It's already two minutes after nine. They know better than to be late for something like this. Shit, we were all here fifteen minutes early."

"Don't get your back up, Neal," Yancey told him. "So they're a few minutes late? What the fuck?"

"Sure, and supposing something's happened to them and they don't show up at all? Suppose they funked out on the job, the last minute?"

Yancey thought about it. "If worst comes to worst, we go ahead without them."

"Without Graycoff to set it up so that the law pins it on Ben Buford? You out of your fucking mind?"

Yancey held out the palms of his hands. "Of course, it'll be better *with* him, I'm just saying we can still pull the gig without him if we absolutely have to."

The phone rang and Jeff Bigger, a slender, morose-looking black, with eyes like a wounded spaniel, was standing by the desk. He picked it up.

"Yes? . . . Okay. I see. Be right down."

"Was that them?" Wickman said eagerly.

Bigger shook his head. "Desk clerk. Somebody left a written message there for me."

"Shit, man, why didn't you ask him to read it to you over the phone? You can't go chasing all over the goddamned hotel at a time like this."

Bigger looked at him levelly. "Suppose the message was sent by Graycoff or LeDuc? You want the

clerk to read something like that?" He picked up his overlarge theatrical glasses with butterfly wings protruding from the sides, and put them on. They made his overall appearance in the sack dress he was wearing, and the fancily coiffed wig piled high on his head, even more grotesque.

"Well, for Christ's sake, hurry back," Wickman told him as he went out.

"Oh, man," Wickman said to Yancey then. "Supposing something happens to that mother, too? With no lockman, even, the whole sonofabitch blows right up in our faces. All this shit for nothing."

"What's going to happen to him? He goes down to the lobby and back, that's all. Meanwhile, Graycoff and that little gunsel, LeDuc, will probably get here any minute."

Wickman grumbled. He had an intuition, a sneaky little feeling that he couldn't explain even to himself that something was going wrong, very big and wrong. The last time he'd had such an intuition was just before he got busted.

The keys to the safe-deposit boxes in the vault were kept in the small safe behind the front desk. If a guest wanted something from his box, the procedure was to go to the desk. The clerk would summon the security officer, who in turn would require the guest's identification, then take him into and through his office and open the door of the vault.

The management of the Hotel Armand considered this part of a good security program. So did Neal Wickman when he told the others about it. Any kind of razzle-dazzle at the front desk was

asking for trouble. Which was where Jeff Biggers, the professional lockman, came in.

The vault, itself, was the balance of the security. It was behind Drake's private office and could be entered only through that office. Its other three walls backed up against thick concrete walls of the street-level garage area. The door of the vault was of solid steel construction. There could be no time lock because guests might need access to their strongboxes at any time of the day or night.

Drake had been a methodical man. The keys on his ring were all labeled by his own simple personal code. The one marked O admitted Bigger and Graycoff to his office, while Andy LeDuc created a distraction at the front desk. The one marked V opened the vault bolt lock. On the back of the same key were the three combination numbers of the other lock that Drake had been too lazy to commit to memory. Or for the benefit of the new assistants he had from time to time.

It took less than thirty seconds to get inside. The vault was a very small room perhaps fifteen feet square. The walls were steel. There was the faint hum of an air conditioner. There was a small desk and a matching chair for guests who wanted to go over some papers before putting them back in their strongboxes. The boxes themselves lined one wall.

Bigger consulted the list of box numbers that matched the names LeDuc had written down in Creighton's office. The names that matched box numbers had been on a check list in Drake's desk.

Donny Graycoff watched Bigger go to work. The man unfolded a velvet-lined case of small, glistening tools that looked like intricate darning or weaving

needles. The first box lock sprung open as Bigger worked with his second pick. It held nothing but a packet of legal-looking papers. Bigger put it aside. The second box contained a jewel case, holding a man's diamond studs, ring, matching tie clasp.

Bigger looked up at the lanky figure of Graycoff. "We want jewelry, too?"

Graycoff shook his head. "Fuck it. Nothing but the bread."

The fifth box held a long Manila envelope stuffed with fifty and hundred dollar bills.

"Paydirt," Bigger said. His thumb riffled the edges of the bills before Graycoff reached over and snatched it out of his hand, stuffed it into his shoulder handbag.

"Get going!"

It was less than twenty minutes before they hit the last of the boxes that they'd been looking for and Graycoff's bag was now stuffed with what should amount to half a million dollars or more. Just having all that cash in his possession made the tall actor feel lightheaded and as though he couldn't get his breath. Half a million fucking dollars! The words kept bouncing off the inside of his skull.

Jeff Bigger looked at him. "That's five," he said. "Is that it?"

Donny Graycoff sucked in a long, deep breath. He felt a hundred feet tall, looking down on the other man who was like a miniature doll below him. A doll dressed in weird drag-queen clothes that Donny Graycoff, smart Donny, brilliant Donny, who wasn't about to let any bunch of smart-ass nigger crooks fuck *him,* had supplied.

"Yeah," he said, his own voice sounding strange to him. "That's it, all right."

He took the Smith and Wesson from his handbag and shot Jeff Bigger through one of his sad, hounddog eyes. Bigger's bare legs went out from under him like a rag doll's and he lay down dead in a soft slump.

Graycoff then fished something else from the bag and dropped it on the floor near Bigger's body. It was a small gold earring, the kind for pierced ears. On the wider part of the bottom of the ring was engraved a set of initials: BB. Another contribution from Neal Wickman, bless his big dumb heart, Donny Graycoff thought.

Outside, nobody paid any attention to Graycoff as he emerged from the security office. Andy LeDuc came over to him. "Where's Jeff?" he asked.

Graycoff shrugged. "Who needs him?"

"Jesus!" LeDuc said. "Only two of us, now, huh? Oh, you crazy, conniving motherfucker."

"Not quite yet," Graycoff reminded him.

"Yeah," LeDuc said.

In the Los Angeles High School Yearbook, his senior year, they said about Donald Ashton Graycoff: "Quiet, likable Donny, star of the Senior School play, has as much talent for acting as he does for dropping a basketball through the hoop. Dramatic Society, two years. Letterman, baseball, basketball, two years. Senior Class secretary. The girls of LA High are going to miss you, Donny, but we'll be rooting you to stardom—on the field or the silver screen."

It hadn't worked out quite like that. In his second year at a small Midwest university where the major sport was basketball, all-conference forward Graycoff took a thousand dollars to make sure that his team didn't win a certain game by more than

five points. Unfortunately, the man was being tailed by a private investigator working for a Congressional investigative committee looking into point shaving.

When the subpoena was served on him, Donny was told by one side that he would be doing college sports a big favor, and probably no charges would be pressed against him personally, if he told the truth at the hearings. The other side told him he could do that—if he wanted pretzels for legs the rest of his life. He took the Fifth Amendment. It seemed a sensible way to look at it.

With his basketball career finished, Graycoff took his lanky frame off to New York to set the theatrical world ablaze. He did about as well as two Boy Scouts rubbing wet Girl Scouts together. He studied, joined little theater groups, got an agent who had several girl clients who got more work. Graycoff made coffee-and-beans money, waiting on tables, cleaning up pool halls. He did work in a couple of off-Broadway shows that closed in almost record time.

It was almost two years before Graycoff tripped over the remnants of his ego and realized he was never going to get rich that way. He began to work as a runner for one of the midtown books. He acquired a taste for good clothes, good food, clean sheets, and warm women. And all the time he knew he was getting the brown end of the stick. He was doing all the work and the wheels were making the real money, had the Porsches, and three-hundred-dollar threads.

When Neal Wickman approached him, the ten-thousand-dollar offer sounded like a million. But the more he thought about the big, important part

scheduled for him, the smaller the sound got. It began to gnaw at him.

As he eventually asked Bigger and LeDuc: "Who needs Wickman and Yancey? What do they contribute?"

"The whole idea," Bigger answered.

"Shit! I got a way to improve it, refine it, simplify it, that doesn't require any extra fat or muscle just standing around watching us do the work. We're doing the heavy stuff and between us we get thirty thou, right? How much does that leave Wickman and Yancey for their split? Four hundred and seventy thousand?"

It was going over and he pressed. "Three into five hundred thou comes out over a hundred fifty grand apiece."

They nodded thoughtfully.

Tonight, in the vault of the Hotel Armand, Donny Graycoff did some rapid calculation in his head as Jeff Bigger finished his part of the job. It came out a quarter million each for him and Andy LeDuc. He liked that even better.

When the knock on the door sounded, Neal Wickman, as close to being white with fury as he'd ever get, flung it open and started right in on them.

"You stupid, dumb-ass, motherfucking, retarded numb-numbs! Where the fuck have you *been?* What happened? You've screwed up our whole schedule."

Graycoff smiled. "Oh, no," he said softly.

"Why not?" Wickman said. He suddenly realized someone was still missing. "Oh, shit, and now where's that idiot prick Bigger?"

"Oh, he's gone."

Wickman's brown eyes popped. He smeared a hand across the unfamiliar smoothness of his upper lip, messing up his lipstick. "Gone? What are you trying to put down?"

"I mean, he's dead, man," Graycoff said.

"Dead?"

"Don't keep repeating after me," Graycoff told him. "And don't get your ass in an uproar. The whole thing's over. Nothing to worry about. We already got the money, me and LeDuc." He reached into his handbag.

Neal Wickman staggered backward as though he'd been kicked in the chest. Horrified, he watched Graycoff whip the revolver out of the bag, point it at him. At the same time, he was aware of LeDuc drawing the sawed-off shotgun from his bag. Suddenly the whole story was capsulized for him. He half-lunged, half-dove toward the bed where he and Yancey had thrown the bags holding their own weapons. It was neither any dumber nor any smarter than just standing there and taking it. The only difference was that Graycoff's shot caught him behind the right ear, rather than full in the face.

The booming echo that followed sent a closely packed cluster of birdshot into Yancey's chest as he jackknifed out of his chair.

"That about ties it," Graycoff said quietly. "If anybody knocks at the door and wants to know what all the noise is about, tell 'em we're watching a western on TV and don't bother us or we'll be late for the ball."

He kicked off the shoes he was wearing. "How can the chicks wear those fuckers? I can't even feel my toes." He walked over to a desk where Jeff Bigger had left a cigarette lighter and a can of

fluid. He stared at it for a moment, then picked up both the lighter and the small can. He walked over to the drawn drapes, stepping carefully around the bloody remains of Yancey. He sprayed the drapes well with the lighter fluid and then set them aflame. On the way out he picked up a piece of hotel stationery and a matching envelope.

"You're crazy," Le Duc told him.

"Let's go, man."

Out in the quiet, door-lined corridor, Donny Graycoff paused before the slotted mail chute that conveyed mail to the special big box in the lobby below. He used the few remaining drops of lighter fluid to douse the envelope with the piece of stationery folded into it, set it on fire and slid it through the slot. He watched the burning object slip down the glass drop and out of sight.

At the entrance to the grand ballroom, Graycoff went up to the older of the two security guards in uniform, and lisped: "A Mr. Drake asked me to tell you gentlemen that he needs you up on the fourth floor. There's some kind of trouble. I think maybe a robbery or something."

"No shit," the guard said. He jogged the other man with his elbow. "Let's go, kid. We'd better get up there. Not going to be any trouble down here, anyhow."

That's what he thought.

The members of the Congress of GAY were mostly clustered around the front of the bandstand at the far end, where a contest to select Miss Grand Ball was being held. Graycoff approached a queen with hip-long, pink-dyed hair. "Excuse me, sweetie," he said. "Can I borrow your lipstick for a moment?"

The gay one turned and batted his false-lashed

eyes at the sight of the tall, bony black man in his garish garb, now barefoot. He smiled, fished into his purse. "But, of course, although I'm afraid it's not quite your color."

"It don't really matter, baby," he answered.

The queen was puzzled as Graycoff ambled away.

First he and Andy LeDuc overturned the long buffet table, sending punchbowl, other glassware and dishes, daintily cut sandwiches, and ten or fifteen bottles of whiskey and mixes to the floor in a great, crashing welter.

Graycoff then took the lipstick and scrawled in foothigh letters on the cream-white wall:

BURN PIGS!

He turned to face the petrified conclave across the ballroom. He jammed the air with his upraised fist, cried out in his practiced imitation of Buford's stentorian tone: "Get out! Get out while you still have a chance!" With his other hand he stabbed a long, bony forefinger toward the exit. "We're burning down the motherfucking building. The building's on *fire!* Run! *Run* for the street!"

They ran.

They were all scrabbling toward the exit, the word fire screaming from their painted lips. At the door, they jammed, began climbing over each other, striking out with their handbags, clawing with their long nails, tearing at each other's clothing. The air was suddenly filled with silk, lace, and wigs.

Graycoff and LeDuc joined the screaming mob when the jam broke. In the lobby, itself, the panicked herd paused only long enough to glance toward the small group standing around the lobby

mailbox, from which thick black smoke was curling. Twenty voices screamed as one: "Fire!"

At the revolving lobby door, the stampede was momentarily stopped by a group of firemen trying to remove the door so that they could drag hose into the lobby. For a few seconds it was a stalemate. Then the rather tattered-looking mob gave way as a fireman turned on the nozzle by mistake and drove a gushing path through them.

Observing all this from a vantage point in a chair especially reserved for her in the lobby, longtime guest Mrs. Frisby belched the soft creamy vapors of Amontillado and observed to herself that the Hotel Armand was getting as fucked up in its old age as she was. In the morning, she would toddle over to Sherry-Netherland and see about a small suite with a view of Central Park.

A few doors away from the hotel, Donny Graycoff and Andy LeDuc hailed a cab. As they got in, the cabby said: "What's happening at the Armand, hey?"

"Beats the shit out of me," Graycoff said.

6

It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop. The day itself had been bad enough for Shaft. Chore day. He'd cleaned out several months' accumulation of crap from the files and desk drawers in his office.

He concluded that he had more goddamn loose paper clips than anybody in the world. He was a Croesus of Clips. But what was happening to all the papers that were supposed to be held together by them? He was afraid to look. So he didn't.

In the afternoon, Shaft visited Senator Stovall, who was better but not quite up to chasing any nurses around the bed. That was a bad scene. At best, Shaft was not very good on the sympathy routine and what did you say to someone laid up in a hospital bed? How are you? You can see how they are, for Christ's sake. Rotten. So that's about the beginning and end of it. But he did pick up his check for one day's pay, plus a five hundred bonus for getting back the senator's wallet. When he was about to split, Stovall said: "One thing I can't stand about you, Shaft, is that goddamned Mickey Mouse watch you wear. You can hear it tick across a busy street. Lemme see it."

Shaft, puzzled, but putting it down to the medication the poor bastard must be getting, unlatched the simple stainless-steel Omega and handed it over.

"Piece of crap," Stovall said, dropping it into the bedpan on the night stand. It clinked against the porcelain like a silver dollar.

"Here."

Stovall handed him a gold Patek-Phillippe about as thin as a communion wafer and the diameter of an overcoat button. There were no numbers, just cut emeralds in the gold face to mark the hours. The band was gold, too, a series of links individually bolted together. It was possibly four or five thousand dollars' worth of watch.

"I can't take——" Shaft began.

"Fuck off," the senator said.

Shaft put on the watch and left. He checked the time a lot all day.

And all day he tried not to think about the night. Eating dinner by himself, going back up to his apartment and sipping on some Johnnie Walker Black, listening to the stereo, watching the news on his color TV until the war stuff came on. He had tried not to think about it.

He kept telling himself that maybe what he'd told Anderozzi—that it was all some kind of a crazy gag or something to put a little hair up the ass of Ben Buford—was probably true. Nothing was really going to happen this Friday night. And if it did, it was no skin off of him, nor Buford, if the big clown had done what he was told to do. When he reached the limit of his patience, about nine o'clock, Shaft couldn't stand it any more. He was about to run across the street to the No-Name, swap lies about chicks with his friend, Rollie Nickerson the bartender and maybe . . . then the telephone dingled, of course.

Oh, shit. Here it was. Here it came. Buford had blown up *The New York Times* and gotten away

with nine million dollars and eight crotch pictures needed for ads in the Sunday Magazine.

The female voice was low and throaty and poured syrup right out of the receiver into Shaft's ear. "Hello. John Shaft?"

"It depends," he said, his paranoia blooming. "I haven't decided tonight."

Her chuckle was as intriguing and sexy as the voice. "I see. Well, this is Marilyn Crispin. A friend of Winnie's. You picked her up at my place the other night."

A quick flash of the photograph of her he'd seen. Big girl, but cute.

"Sure," he said. "The swimmer who keeps a pet wolf."

"Animal is a perfect gentleman. He's never bitten anybody yet."

"Swallows them whole. Okay, what can I do for you?"

"I might as well be direct. I wanted to talk with you about Winnie. You know, she's probably my best friend."

"What does Winnie's best friend want to talk about?"

"Not over the phone. Are you busy tonight?"

"Not really."

He began to hate the dialogue. He was beginning to sound like Upper East Side New York.

"Could—would you come over for a little while? For a quick drink and a small chat. I'm really quite eager to meet you. Winnie told me a lot about you."

"I don't like quick drinks," he said, his hostility leaking out. "And small chats bore the shit out of me."

"Well, we could have two drinks then."

"Will you lock the wolf in the kitchen?"
"Of course," she said. She hung up.

The hair was no longer short-cropped but hung in burnished waves to her shoulders, the color of pecans on a tree shining in the summer sun. The shoulders were broad for a woman but softly rounded and tapering down into smooth, firm, unmuscular upper arms. She was wearing a solid black body shirt, that fitted her like a coating of India ink, over a pair of white slacks.

She went to the bar for his Scotch and her Daiquiri.

7

Shaft got the call early Saturday morning. Ben Buford's mother, voice wavering, tired, on the edge of tears. But not quite there; probably already all cried out. Of course, it was in all the newspapers. Shaft hadn't seen them, but he could visualize the headlines.

"We know he didn't do it, John but . . . *they* think he did. You—you've got to help him."

"I wish I could," he sighed.

Why had this woman been so nice to him when he ran the streets and alleys of Harlem with Buford? Why couldn't she have ignored his difficult presence in this world like everybody else—except, possibly, the police—so that he would not now owe her and need to serve her sorrow. She treated him then, as she treated him now, like he was Ben Buford's brother, another of her errant sons, but still her child. It made him so angry at Buford for getting into trouble and embarrassing John Shaft, kin to all man but brother to none, that he wanted to strangle the man.

"You'll think of something," she said.

"I don't know where to find him," he said. "He may not even be in the city."

"I take care of that right now, Johnny."

Shit! How long had it been since anyone had

called him Johnny—with affection? "Listen, darlin', he gave me a number to call, tol' me never, ever use it unless it's a real emergency, matter of life or death. Well, maybe that's what this is. You call this number, hear? They'll find him."

She gave him a number and he jotted it down. It was a New Jersey exchange. "All right," he said. "I'll try it. I can't really promise you anything—I'll do whatever I can. But you take it easy. It's probably all a big mistake and it'll straighten out. Don't worry about it."

"Yes," she said. "All right. But I guess I don't know any other way than to worry about you boys."

He hung up, sat staring at the phone. John Shaft, worker of miracles for worried mothers. The taste in his mouth was suddenly drop biscuits spread with bacon grease. She had crucified him on a cross of white flour, nailed him with a battered cupcake tin, put the balm of drippings on the wounds of love. He could still remember. Could you ask a man to live or die for the ghostly aroma of a welfare stew made from chicken necks and gizzards?

Yes, you could. Little old ladies whose fragmented hearts still shattered could ask that of you —and you did it.

He dialed the number she gave him. It rang for quite a while before a rather thick-sounding voice came on, saying: "Who?"

"Tell Skinny his mother wants him to see me."

Pause. "Who?"

"Mrs. Huey Buford, numb-numb."

"Hold on a sec." The business of covering the mouthpiece with the hand while a small conference went on. Then: "Call back in twenty minutes." *Blam,* down with the receiver.

He made coffee, showered, shaved and dressed, then made the second call. Different voice this time. "Yeah?"

"I'm calling back."

"Who is?"

"You fucking well know. Is he going to see me or not?"

"Yeah, well, okay. Can you get to the Washington Square arch without being tailed?"

"Why not?"

"Just make sure. Be there one hour exactly."

That was it.

They were in a black Ford Galaxie, three of them. They drove up, opened the back door, and said: "Get in." Shaft was a little surprised. No Afro hairdos, no flashy clothes. Very conservative, black suits, dark ties, they looked more like Muslims or Sons of Watts than part of Buford's movement. He made no attempt at conversation and neither did they.

Out of the tunnel on the Jersey side, one of them turned his head around from the front seat and said: "Down on the floor behind the front seat and don't try to look up or out until we tell you to."

Shaft obeyed, even with some relief. At least these dudes weren't executioners. If they were going to knock him off, they couldn't care less if he saw where they were taking him. In the back, Shaft slouched on the base of his spine, back against one door. They rode for perhaps half an hour or three quarters. Part of that time they could have been going around in circles.

"Okay," a voice from the front seat said. "We're there."

Hunching himself up off the floor Shaft saw that they'd pulled up in front of an old two-story cinder-

block building with the ground-floor store windows painted black. A sign over the front door read:

FLOWERS' FUNERAL PARLOR
WE TAKE GOOD CARE
SOCIAL SECURITY PAYMENTS ACCEPTED

The neighborhood could have been any place in the black section of almost any New Jersey city. Old. Some small stores, tailor, laundromat, Pop's Café, all the taxpayer flats up over them. Big, old-fashioned frame houses here and there, most looking as though a good wind would blow them over. The yards were cluttered. In a driveway next to the funeral parlor stood a 1960 Cadillac hearse, gleaming, mirroring reflected images.

Just inside the door was a small reception room. One of the men pointed to a chair, said, "Wait here," and went through another door. The other two sat down opposite Shaft and stared at him as though they were both Joe Frazier staring down an opponent while listening to a ref's instructions. Shaft gave it back to them, one at a time and they both broke, gave it up, and fished cigarettes from their pockets. The other one came back a moment later, and said, "Follow me."

His two friends trailed Shaft down a worn, carpeted hallway and through another door into a small facsimile of a chapel. There were folding chairs, a pulpit, a small old organ that looked as though it probably had only a few good wheezes left, dusty empty flower racks. Sitting on a black casket was Benjamin Buford, his curly black hair trimmed into what he obviously hoped was a coiffure that would throw off recognition. Gone were the gold-rimmed glasses in favor of a cheap pair of

brown sunglasses. He stared dolefully through them at Shaft. He was wearing a neat black business suit, similar to those of his cohorts.

"What do you want?" he said.

Shaft made a hand gesture that took in the room. "Good hobby to get into—in your line of business. What the fuck do you think I want? Maybe somebody to tell me how that mother of yours had a creep like you."

From the corner of his eye, Shaft saw one of the men who had ridden with him in the car start toward him. He was the biggest one, with the sloping shoulders that have bunching ridges of muscle leading up to the thick neck. I'm a rough one, he probably thought to himself.

Shaft said to Buford: "Tell that muscle-bound prick to back up or you'll be fitting him for that black box you're sitting on."

"Cool it, Bream," Buford said a fraction of a second before the man would have had a piece of Shaft's elbow wedged between his teeth.

"He got a bad mouth," Bream said, retreating reluctantly, glaring.

"All right, smart-ass, why didn't you do like I told you? With a halfway decent alibi, you'd have saved the price of a haircut. Oh, no, you don't listen to anything that makes sense, that balloon between your ears is so full of hot air——"

"I had an alibi," Buford yelled at him. "I did what you said. Went to the library, too, and made the chick at the desk know who I was. In fact, she already knew. But I kept letting her dig that I was there *all that time.* Then, the fucking library closed."

"Then you went into seclusion, I suppose," Shaft said.

"I went with the chick. Suzie, her name was."

"And you went to her fucking place and balled her."

Buford nodded. "Figured I'd give her maybe an hour. But it wasn't enough. So we smoked and balled and she just about wore me out. First thing you know, I crashed."

"Beautiful. And when you learned your ass was on the line, you tried to get her to alibi you. She wouldn't, of course."

Buford's long hand twined and untwined in his lap. He didn't say anything. He knew he didn't have to. Shaft had just said it all.

Then he drew a deep breath, and said: "I got to get out of the country."

"Where?"

"What difference does it make? Somewhere I can't be extradited. I didn't pull that crazy hit in New York and they're not going to sit my ass in jail for it. Maybe Algiers. I don't know."

"You don't qualify as a tourist anymore, you know," Shaft reminded him.

"All right then, Havana. I've got friends there."

"Then tell your friends to get you there, don't tell me. You're gonna get in shape chopping sugar cane." He laughed. Then he made Anderozzi's offer. "They know pretty well you're not guilty, but they got to make a slam at you. Meanwhile, they'll get the muzzler who was impersonating you. How many guys who look like that are running around, trying to find someplace to go with his quarter-million share. You come back with me and that almost *proves* you're not afraid, you're clean. Then, maybe one of your people could get to that bitch in Illinois and get her to admit she was with you all night."

"Crap!" Buford scoffed. "The pigs would say we made it up; she's a believer, just trying to bail me out."

Shaft sighed. "Believe me, I'd love to get you to Havana, Ben, if I knew any way how . . . and if I thought they'd keep you there. Every night I'd go to sleep thinking about you cutting cane twelve hours a day and nobody to listen to your horseshit because they're all so busy *living* it. Maybe Fidel would put you on his cabinet basketball team."

"Oh, yeah, man, let them lock me up and throw away the frigging key for maybe three or four years, while their fucked-up legal system jerks itself off with delays and postponements. Once they get *me* in the can I could die of old age before they let me out. There wouldn't be any bail, remember?" He made a gesture with his fist. "No. Tell your Italian pig friend that I said no thanks and go fuck himself."

Shaft nodded. "That's a very helpful attitude. I'm sure the Mafia heat, responsible for getting back all that skim money, will appreciate it making it easier for them to get at you."

"You think they don't have the connections to get at me in the Joint? One morning they'd carry me out and everybody would say I fell on my throat on a razor blade. Ain't no place safe, but right here."

"And I'm not sure about *it*," Shaft said. He stepped over to Buford and said: "Stand up a minute."

The two monkeys in the black suits started toward them as Shaft gently eased Buford aside, reached down, and pulled open the lid of the coffin. It was filled with perhaps a hundred different makes and calibers of rifles.

Wheeling, Shaft sucked in his gut just in time to only partially take Bream's short hooking left fist, that had been intended for his kidney, across the side of his ribs. It hurt. So did the fist he brought up and slammed into Bream's windpipe. The man dropped, clutching his throat, gagging, his flat brown face taking on a bluish tinge, his eyes bulging.

The other missed a roundhouse swing and Shaft chunked in a right cross that hit just right on the jaw and the cracking of the bone was audible.

Ben Buford started to come after him. "What the fuck do you think you're doing to my people?"

"The same thing I'm going to do to you, you dumb shithead, you make another move toward me." The look in his eyes stopped Buford. Shaft nudged Bream's unconscious body with the toe of his shoe. "He got me where he wanted, I'd be pissing blood for a month. As it is, I may have a cracked rib."

He moved toward the door. "I'll find my way back to the city by myself. If you talk to your mother, tell her I at least tried to help you, like I promised her."

Walking away from the funeral parlor, he told himself, well, that was it. He was out of the whole sorry mess. But he really didn't believe it.

Back at his apartment, the first thing Shaft did was call Buford's contact number again. "Tell Long Ben to forget about skyjacking his way to Havana. Sky Marshals at every airport are on special alert, with recent photos, all ready to grab him."

Shaft had expected Rollie Nickerson's apartment to be a sweatbox this steaming August Saturday afternoon. It was cool as a cave. So was Rollie,

part-time actor, part-time bartender at the No Name Bar, cool and loose and not giving a shit about what the world was after. He was watching a baseball game on a portable TV.

"Hey, man," Shaft said. "It's like a meat cooler in here."

Nickerson pointed proudly to the new air conditioner in his living room window. "I bought it, Sherlock. Paid for in cash. You didn't hear? I did a fucking commercial. Me, Roland Nickerson, star of stage, screen, and bad breath."

"No shit!"

"No, halitosis. I did this thing for a new mouthwash. There's this chick, see, and we're both carrying a load of packages and we bump into each other, getting into an eleva——"

"Spare me," Shaft cut in, holding up a palm. "Right now, I'm backed up against the wall and I need your help."

Rollie Nickerson, hair lank and disordered, face nothing but cheekbones, nose and chin, looked like young Lincoln and now chose to act like Peter Lorre attempting to calm the Wolf Man.

"Yes, marster! Anything you desire, marster. Even unto my own life, marster."

"Oh, shut the fuck up. Is there some book or catalog that casting directors, people like that, use to pick actors? A directory with pictures, maybe?"

"Sure, baby." Rollie showed his cheaply capped teeth. "You want to admire my picture, huh?"

While Rollie got out the book, Shaft described the man he was looking for. Rollie said: "He don't sound like the leading man type. Try character actors."

Shaft peeled through the pages for two innings. Rollie was silent, except to ask if Shaft wanted a cold beer. He did. Rollie got it. And Shaft looked at

the faces very slowly, very carefully. Finally, he stopped. There was something about the thin, sullen black face staring at him that vaguely reminded him of Ben Buford. Under the photo, he read:

"Donald Ashton Graycoff (also Donald Gray). Six feet, four inches, one hundred seventy pounds. Sings, dances, impersonations. Credits: Second lead, *The Strings of Spring*, West Village Theater Group; Lead Singer, *Fey, Fickle & Funky*, Black Artists' Repertory Company; Supporting roles, summer stock, 1970-71. Representation, Marv Shaken."

Shaft called Rollie over, pointed. "You happen to know this one?" There was a pause for a double play before Nickerson looked.

"Worked with him about a week in *Strings of Spring* until it sprung a leak. No pay. I quit. What about him?"

"I'm asking you."

"Big, skinny, moody, not too friendly."

"Where can I find him?"

"Well, the agent they mention is no longer in business. Oh, yeah, I just remembered. Last I heard, couple of months ago, he was running for some book in the Times Square area. Another black actor, nice guy I know, was a friend of his, told me I ever want to get a bet down to see Donny."

Staring hard at the photograph, Shaft pictured the man as he might look, wearing a wig similar to Buford's hairstyle. An actor, he might get away with it. An actor could do a fair impression of Buford's voice.

Shaft slammed the book shut, handed it back to Rollie.

"You ready to hear how I solved postnasal drip?" Nickerson asked.

"Raincheck, baby," Shaft said, heading for the door.

The Book, a short, squat gray-haired man who looked like a waiter who'd just received a dime tip, never looked at Shaft as he talked. His eyes searched up and down the street, constantly moving, wary. He shifted the soggy stub of a cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"I wish I *knew* where the cocksucker was," the Book said. "He ain't showed for three days. Cost me action that couldn't get down. The sonofabitch was sick or something, he knew where to call me. You're the second one's been looking for him today. What'd the prick do?"

"Got my sister pregnant," Shaft said, walking away. Somebody else nosing around for Donald Graycoff? He hadn't bothered to ask what the dude looked like. The Book probably didn't know, hadn't looked at him, either. The Vegas man. If it had been one of Anderozzi's stooges, the Book would still be running.

Now, where was he going to find a tall, skinny, basketball-player type of black actor, running around with his ass in his hand and maybe a quarter million in his pockets? He worked on it and the notion slowly came to him. Bellhops and bookies sometimes worked together. He was back once again to little Billie Yeats.

The two men looked like out-of-town small-businessmen sports visiting the big city. Open-throat sport shirts, off-the-rack jackets, slacks, white doeskin loafers. Just a couple of thirtyish guys on the

town. Unless you were cop or hood, you wouldn't exactly understand the thing about their eyes. What you saw there was death. It was their profession and they neither liked nor disliked it. All they knew was that it paid well.

When she opened the door of the Queens apartment in answer to their quiet knock, all Bebe Jennings knew was that they weren't law. A slender, tallish brown-skinned girl with black Shirley Temple curls, a pretty face, and slim hips and small breasts. Just a child. Bebe had been busted for everything from shoplifting to soliciting. And she knew the Man. These two weren't cop.

"Mrs. LeDuc?" asked the one with the blue beard stain no razor could completely remove.

She shook her head, giving them the little-girl smile. "Uh-uh."

"Oh. His daughter, then?"

"Just a friend. Just visiting. He ain't here."

"That's too bad. We're friends of Andy's. He's —uh—done some work for us and we have a job he might be interested in. How soon will he be back?"

Shrug. "He out gettin' drunk, maybe. He could be gone a week."

"When did he leave?"

"Yestiddy."

"Is there anyone else we might contact who might know where he is? We need him right away. Friends, relatives, maybe?"

"I know he got a married sister lives somewhere in Westchester. I don't know her name nor whereabouts."

"In Westchester, huh. Well, thank you. If we don't find him we'll probably check back tomorrow."

"Oh, sure," Bebe said. She could hardly wait for

Andy to get back so she could tell him about these two weird whitey dudes who said they had work for him. Once when he was very drunk, Andy had told her that he had handled a hit in Harlem for the mob.

Why did she tell them Andy only left yesterday, she wondered. Maybe because it only seemed like yesterday, she'd been having fun by herself in his flat. Actually it had been over a week since he'd moved all his shit out, crazy gun collection and everything, telling her he'd never be back.

She didn't believe that, of course. She was surprised he'd stayed away this long. It couldn't be much longer, though, she knew.

She hadn't really lied to those two creeps. She didn't know the name of Andy's sister, nor exactly where she lived. But she could find out any time she wanted to.

Billie Yeats had moved quite suddenly. No, the super didn't have any forwarding address for him. The super was smirking about how he got the queen out of his closet when the neighbors complained about a banging noise that went on for seven hours. Shaft carefully folded the ten. It was double what the little fart had paid him *not* to give out the new address.

Shaft didn't have to touch Billie after he walked into the small apartment still smelling of paint. All Shaft had to do was say: "You got more closet space here, Billie?" The big, surprised eyes bugged in anticipated terror. "I want right answers and fast," Shaft went on. "All right?"

It was all right. Yes, it was.

Yeats knew Donny Graycoff. A guest at the hotel wanted to make a little bet. Donny got the business.

Billie made a few bucks, too. Donny wanted to know what was happening at the hotel that particular week and Yeats gave him the information. Yes, Billie told Graycoff about the gay convention. Yes, Billie also told him about Shaft being hired to bodyguard Senator Stovall. Why? Billie didn't really know except that Donny had paid him a hundred bucks to keep him posted on *anything* unusual that came up at the hotel that week and when Billie saw Shaft talking with the head security officer, he got curious, asked questions, and got answers. Part of the hundred was also for giving Donny Graycoff the name of a costumer who designed gowns for transvestites and rented them out.

No, he swore he hadn't known anything about any robbery, honest to God, and may his sweet mother never breathe again if he was lying. No, he didn't know who was in on it with Graycoff. He'd never met any of Graycoff's friends. Wait a minute, he had mentioned one name, Wickman or Wickerman or something like that. It rang a little bell with Shaft, but that was all.

That was enough.

"I'll always know where to find you," he said. He smiled. Billie broke into a sweat. Cold.

Victor Anderozzi was discouraged. They had nothing. It was his Saturday off, but the commissioner had suggested that he'd better stay on it. He had. They still had nothing. Shaft should have Buford by now. That would be enough to get the commissioner off his back. But no Shaft. His thoughts made the ring of the telephone even more irritating.

"Vic?"

"Yeah. We know Buford is back in the East and I want him very much. Produce him or it's my ass."

"Who'd want it? But I've got the guy who was in on the gig. The one they thought was Buford."

"You got him? Where?"

"Only his name. He's a black actor named Donald Ashton Graycoff, *aka* Donald Gray. Between jobs, he runs for a Book in the Times Square area. He didn't show up Friday or Saturday. And since then, somebody else has been looking for him. Guess who?"

Anderozzi jotted the name down on a pad. "Okay. How do you know?"

"I don't *know*. I didn't see him robbing the fucking hotel. But this is the guy."

"Maybe——"

"Knock off the shit, Anderozzi. You want a lead, that's it. Now, what does the name Wickman or Wickerman mean to you?"

"One of the dead ones at the hotel. Nothing on him at all. But the other stiff who was with him was a man called Yancey. It helps Buford. Yancey was an ex-con, gone straight, making it fairly well with a small chain of restaurants. Until Buford and his movement put Yancey out of business, boycotts and picketing his places because he wouldn't contribute to Buford's organization. Yancey wouldn't be playing footsie in any ripoff with Buford. It may say something of why this gang chose to frame Ben for their job. Maybe Yancey was the leader or one of them."

"Doesn't he have a first name, this Yancey?"

"Saul."

"*Saul* Yancey, a black man?"

"It's a biblical name, shithead. You should read more."

"You've probably already checked him out."

Anderozzi sighed. "And found nothing. Has a small family, but they were in shock over his death and didn't really believe the circumstances. They obviously didn't know anything about his extra-curricular activities."

Shaft hung up, but he wasn't off the telephone long. Rollie Nickerson called him. He did an impression of a long-distance operator with stutters and then disclosed that he had gone to the trouble of calling a casting agency to get an address where Donny Graycoff might be reached.

Now that was a friend. He promised Nickerson his next three broads and the use of his dentist for the capping of one tooth.

It was a walk-up, a furnished apartment in a building on Amsterdam. There were two names on the mailbox nameplate: Julianson and Graycoff. Shaft started with Julianson.

He knocked on the third-floor door. A reedy male voice said: "Come on in. The door's unlatched."

Cautiously, Shaft turned the handle of the door, nudged it open a few inches. It was dark as a subway men's room.

"I don't like dark places," he called into the room.

Almost instantly a light went on in there. Shaft edged the door open wider. The same voice said: "I'm sorry, sir. Thought it was one of my neighbors dropping by for a visit."

He was sitting in a wheelchair. Anywhere from fifty to seventy, his close-cropped hair was like a cap of white wool that had been crocheted on an island in the English Channel. The brown face was lined and leathery, but there were no sunken cheeks, no dewlaps under the prominent chin.

Milky, sightless eyes stared unseeingly a little to the left of Shaft as he entered the room. Shaft saw that the blinds were drawn, probably to keep the place cooler—and why would a blind man need light, anyhow?

A delicate, slender hand gestured toward a stuffed chair. "Sorry I can't get up. Little stroke about six months ago."

"I don't mean to intrude," Shaft said. "But I'm looking for a Donald Graycoff. This is the only address I had."

"Donny is my nephew. Then, you're in show business, I guess. Used to be myself. Before I lost my sight."

"You might say I'm sort of in the legal business, which is why I want to talk to Donald. Does he live here?"

"Oh, no, not Donny. This crumby furnished room isn't good enough for him." A touch of bitterness there; maybe the old man was going to pan out. "This is just his—well—mail drop and answering service." The long, nervous fingers gestured toward a nearby telephone. "He's out all day and so he wouldn't miss a possible interview for an acting job, he pays for my phone and I take messages for him. I also get his mail."

"Why?"

"Why? Mmmm. Well, he says there are certain people he'd just as soon not let know where he lives. I hope you're not one of them."

"I doubt it. I've never met him. I won't ask you for his address because I doubt he'd be there, anyhow."

The unseeing eyes moved every few seconds along with the head, facing first to the left of

Shaft, then to the right. "You could be right. I tried to call him last night and was told the phone was disconnected. I don't know why he would do that. Suppose there was an important call for him?"

He was a nice old man, probably lonesome, and obviously not even remotely connected with Graycoff's activities. But Shaft didn't have time to sit there and talk. Especially to find out nothing. He decided to break right out with it.

"I'm going to level with you, Mr. Julianson. Graycoff is in big trouble. It's possible I can help him out while I'm performing a service for my client. All they want is the money back."

"Money? What money?" Julianson's thumbs and forefingers rubbed together on the fabric of his trousers.

"Close to half a million dollars. He and another man stole it from my clients. As I said, all they're interested in is getting that money back—or most of it."

For a moment, Shaft thought the man was going to have another stroke. When he was able to speak, he said: "Why—why, that's incredible."

"Yes, it is. I don't have time to explain, Mr. Julianson. You want to save your nephew's life or at least save him from going to prison, I've got to have information that will lead to finding him. Who are some of his friends?"

The old man shook his head, still numbed by Shaft's news. "I—I don't know. He—he never brings any of them here. He doesn't talk much about the way he lives. I know very little about his present life."

"When was the last time he was here?"

"Let me see. Thursday, I think. Yes, I'm sure it was."

"Did he seem nervous or upset?"

"Nervous, I suppose. Uptight, he'd call it."

"Why was he here?"

"To check on calls and mail, of course."

"Had there been any?"

"No. Oh, yes, he *made* a couple of calls while he was here."

"Who to?"

"I'll have to think a moment. The names don't really mean anything to me. . . ."

"Try," Shaft said.

The thickly curled white head went back and the sightless eyes directed at the ceiling. Then it bobbed back. "Ah, yes," Julianson said. "Wickman."

Sonofabitch! One of the dead ones. Naturally. He could have bet on it. Then the old man said: "The other one was an unusual name. LeDuc. He called him . . . Andy!"

"Old man," Shaft said, "you got one hell of a memory."

"Well, when the eyes go . . ."

Shaft took out his wallet, snicked out two twenties. "How much does Graycoff pay you to take care of his mail?"

"Five dollars a month."

"If the police come, you don't have to tell them what you just told me. It'll be better for Graycoff if you don't. Maybe this'll help." He lifted one of the long, lean, veined hands, pressed the bills into it.

"What are they?"

"Twenties."

"They feel like twenties."

"See you, Mr. Julianson." Shaft headed for the door.

The old man chuckled. "See you," he said.

Bebe Jennings knew she had to go see Andy, for sure. Just the information she had should be good enough for a present, if Andy had it. She knew she was right, after the big, mean-looking black one had come with some phony shit she didn't believe for a minute. Not a *minute*. Cop, that one, some kind of a cop. She could smell it.

She took a shower, got dressed, and went out.

The two white men sitting in the big dark-green Chrysler followed her. The big black man standing on the corner ran to the cab he had waiting around the corner, got in, and told the driver to follow the Chrysler. When Bebe Jennings entered a subway kiosk, one of the white men jumped out of the car and went down after her while the other one parked the car. He was carrying a small suitcase. Shaft paid off the cab and followed him down into the subway station. Before a train arrived, the other white man sauntered down into the station, a brown attaché case in his hand.

Getting some gum from a vending machine, looking as though he didn't even know the others were alive, Shaft thought it would turn out to be a great parade if they didn't argue about who got to play the big bass drum.

Boom, boom, boom. . . .

8

Saturday, at noon, Andy LeDuc awakened dry-mouthed, achey, not knowing where he was. Got to stop killing myself with the juice, he thought. And then he remembered. He sat bolt upright. He was on the bed in the guest cottage behind his sister's house. He got off it at a staggering run and, at the corner of the room, lifted up the frayed carpet, clawed up the loose floorboards, and saw that the suitcase was still there. He hefted one end of it. It was still full. Then he smelled the scent of frying bacon from the kitchen.

The silly sonofabitch, Graycoff, was still here. Where was he going to go, with every cop in the country looking for a nigger of his obvious description? Sure, he had his own identification and they couldn't hold him. But they'd sure as hell look in the suitcase. In *any* suitcase. So he needn't worry about Graycoff copping out on him with all the bread, at least until the word was in the papers that the law had Ben Buford. They would be checking out anybody of that general description. But not out here in the boondocks, if Graycoff stayed in place.

In the bathroom, Andy LeDuc looked at himself in the mirror. The puffy bags under his bloodshot eyes and the all-over ache and sickness of the beer-whiskey hangover was still in him, but dulled a lit-

tle now as he told himself: there stands a very rich man. And soon he'll be richer. As soon as they latch onto Buford and this one doesn't need Donny Graycoff anymore.

He forced himself to stand, shaking, under a shower and then cleaned his teeth. It helped a little, but only one thing would really help, he knew. Dressed, he went out into the kitchen where Graycoff was pushing a piece of scrambled egg onto a fork with a crust of toast. The sight of the food and the smell gave LeDuc's stomach a turn. He quickly grabbed a cold beer from the fridge and took three long gulps from it.

"Ah," he said, "helps put the fire out a little."

Through a mouthful of egg, Graycoff said: "I didn't know you boozed so big."

LeDuc shrugged. "Don't usually. But that was a big night, last night. It got to my nerves. Needed a sleeping tonic."

"Uh-huh," Graycoff said, thinking: and you're a pigeyed liar, too. When he awakened this morning, half a quart of the bourbon was gone and there were four empty cans of beer. Man drinks like that only after years of constant practice.

"What's your sister do, owns this place?" he asked then.

"She don't do nothing. Housewife. Her old man, he owns a florist shop. Didn't you see that big greenhouse right next to this shack?"

"Yeah. It's empty."

LeDuc took another pull at the beer. "They're gone, moved to New Rochelle, where his shop is. Main house is empty, but they told me I could stay here until the end of the month when they're going to tear down the whole thing."

"Who is?"

"Development company. They're putting up a hundred houses right next door to this property. They wanted this piece, too, but my brother-in-law wouldn't take their price, held out for his own. They told him shit on it and went ahead and started building. He had them tabbed right, though. They really needed this place. A month ago, they paid him off. He made forty-eight thousand profit on the house. They're going to build a community clubhouse or some such shit on this property."

"It's a good place to hole up," Graycoff said. "Nothing between here and the main drag but empty lots. Nothing on the other side but that housing development, and across the street, nothing but woods. I went out this morning and checked it out."

LeDuc almost spat out a mouthful of beer. "You crazy, man? Running around showing off? Suppose somebody spotted you? You pass for Buford at the hotel, what's to stop some dumb mother from seeing you out here and thinking you look like Buford?"

"Who was going to see me? Nobody in the woods. Nobody in the empty lots. You can't see down here from the main road."

"Only a few hundred mothers working on those new houses, that's all," LeDuc told him.

"Sure. On Saturday, stupid? They don't work."

LeDuc looked relieved. "Yeah, well, I forgot about that, but it's still not a good idea. You'd better stay inside from here in. We only got until Monday to stay tucked in, I figure. By then the heat got to grab that Buford and once you can walk around, we split up."

"Yeah. *If* they get him. If he don't split the country. What do we do then?"

"Then your ass is on its own. We can't stay here forever. Me, on Monday, I can make all the arrangements to get to South America. Meanwhile, turn on that radio over there. They bust Buford, it'll make the news."

Graycoff watched LeDuc pour a shot from what was left in the bourbon bottle, toss it down neat, shuddering, and follow it with a couple of long swigs of beer. He thought, maybe I won't have to kill him, after all. Dumb sonofabitch will probably do it himself with booze.

Bebe Jennings knew Shaft was following her. Shaft knew she knew. But there wasn't much he could do about it. There was no place to hide on a subway train, except among the people in the rush hour. He'd just have to see how it played. Meanwhile, he was in the car next to hers, along with the two stocky men who were part of the entourage. Vegas? New York? Or part of the heist? What was their interest in LeDuc's girlfriend or sister or whatever she was? Shaft didn't even know who LeDuc was, except that his was the only name, other than Graycoff's, unaccounted for in the robbery. He had to be Graycoff's partner. Shaft hoped. Otherwise he was wasting a lot of time for nothing. He still would be if this little brown fluff didn't lead him to LeDuc—and, hopefully, Graycoff. He would know definitely if and when she tried to shake him.

They changed trains at Times Square and everybody stood around, looking in other directions, pretending that none of them knew the others existed. Bebe got on a Van Cortlandt Park express train and

the others followed. This time Shaft got away from the two white men, and walked through to the car the other side of the one Bebe was sitting in.

She watched him walk through. Did he think she was so stupid she didn't recognize him as the man asking questions at her door an hour ago? At the end of the subway line, she'd fix him. If she couldn't ditch him, she'd turn right around back and head on home. See how he liked that.

At Two hundred and forty-second Street, back on the street, Bebe Jennings walked into a coffee shop. Shaft waited a few moments and then entered and sat at the street end of the counter. He avoided looking at Bebe. He ordered coffee, black. When Bebe finished her own coffee, she headed back for the ladies' room. Let him try to follow me in here, she told herself. And let him rust his ass out there as long as he wants to. I ain't in no hurry. She entered a booth and sat down, passed the time smoking and speculating on what Andy was up to with all these people looking for him, that one following her around like a coon dog looking for his dinner.

Fifteen minutes later, Bebe cracked open the rest-room door. He was gone. She smiled to herself. I reckon he figger I flush myself down the john and drown. Outside, she gave a quick look around and Shaft was nowhere in sight. She crossed the street and walked up a block to wait for a bus to Yonkers.

Shaft was sprawled flat, out of sight, in the back seat of a cab with the meter running. For the five bucks he'd given the driver, he now got the information he wanted. The man said: "She just came out. Now she's walking up to the bus stop."

His hands clasped behind his head, resting comfortably, Shaft told him. "Fine. When she gets on a bus, follow it, but at least a block behind."

About five minutes later, when the cab started, Shaft straightened up. As a bus pulled away, another cab, half a block past the bus stop, also pulled out from the curb. Now the whole parade was on wheels.

The man with the bull neck, and a dimpled bullet-hole scar in the side of it, turned around and looked through the rear window. "The big spade's still with us. You still don't make him for cop?"

"Nah. Private, maybe. The black chick's probably somebody's wife, fucking around with this LeDuc character and her husband put a tail on her. What else could it be? Who else knows this LeDuc jerk heisted that hotel money?"

"Shit, *we* don't even know it for sure, y'know."

"Okay, Dominic, how many dinge gunsels you know who hit with a sawed-off shotgun?"

Dominic grunted. "So we going to carry this spade along the whole way?"

"Not after we make the chick's final destination. He won't be any trouble."

At Getty Square in Yonkers, Bebe changed to another bus. Shaft waited until she boarded it and then switched to a Yonkers cab, with instructions to follow. The other two stayed in their New York cab.

Bebe got off the bus near the end of the line, at a busy thoroughfare called Wemblock Avenue, and started to walk. The two white men paid off their cab and followed on foot at a discreet distance. Shaft kept his wheels, watching the rest of the troupe, until the girl suddenly turned to the right, two blocks from the bus stop. The two white men

started to run. Shaft had his cab ease down that way and stop at the same corner. He got out, paid the driver, and looked up at a sign that read Mumsey Lane. It was a short street that dead-ended about a block away, at the arch-covered entry to a new housing development. Not a soul was in sight. On the right-hand side of the street, there was nothing but a big empty lot, overgrown with high shrubbery and small pine trees. The left side was nothing but woods. The only sign of a house was down at the far right side, just before the development, where a chimney reared up behind a stand of willow trees.

Shaft sucked in his stomach and started to walk. His mouth was dry. He walked loosely, easily, but beneath his clothing every muscle was coiled and ready to take him swiftly, powerfully, in whatever direction he needed to go. Somewhere between here and that house with the chimney, he knew, the men with the suitcase and attaché case were waiting for him. The girl would be in the house by now. Hopefully with LeDuc. More hopefully, with him and Donald Graycoff. If Shaft could just make it there....

Bebe turned into the yard of the big house. It looked empty. There were no curtains, no drapes at the windows. She became even more anxious. On the way from the bus stop, she'd taken her compact from her purse and, using the mirror, looked back. Two white men were following her. Where else would they be going? They hadn't been on the bus. She cursed Andy for having gotten her involved in this, whatever it was. And she had to keep going. Where else was there to go? There weren't even any other houses around.

She was about to go up onto the front veranda

of the big house when she saw Andy's old Chevy parked on a driveway, beside the house. She walked around the house to the car and saw, at the end of the driveway about ten yards in front of the car, the small clapboard guest cottage and the big greenhouse running right up to its side. The whole place was spooky to her, all the trees and thick green shrubbery around, empty and frightening, but still sort of hemming everything in. She was a city girl. And trees and bushes and stuff like that were in Central Park where she didn't go, places for creeps to hide and leap from.

There were curtains in the windows of the cottage, even though they were drawn. She went up to the door. Inside, she could hear a radio playing soul music. And she knocked.

The radio went off, but nobody came to the door. She waited, then knocked again. Still nobody answered. Finally, she called out: "Andy! Andy, it's me, honey. It's all right. Lemme in."

The door opened and Andy LeDuc stood there, blood-shot-eyed and swaying a little. He grabbed her arm and yanked her inside and slammed the door shut. He threw her against a wall so hard Bebe thought her head would crack. She looked at the shotgun Andy was holding. She'd only seen it once before, when he drunkenly told her what it could do.

"You crazy little cunt!" He half-screamed it at her. "What are you doing here? I told you . . . I told you. . . ." He was too angry to get out the words.

Her brown eyes huge with fear, she stared at the shotgun. "Andy, I just come to——"

"You *what?* You'd better tell me fast."

"There's these—Andy, there's some men have

been looking for you, asking me a lot of questions. I—I thought you ought to know."

"Men? What men? Get it out. Quick."

"Two—two white men, Andy. They—they said they had some work for you. I knew—I was sure they weren't cops, Andy. And I didn't tell them nothing. Not nothing."

"That's it?"

"No. Then there was this black man. Today. Just before I left to come up here. I think he was cop. I couldn't be sure. Wanted to know where you were, where could he get in touch with you. I didn't tell him nothin', either. Just gave him a fast brush, but I knew you'd want to know about all this."

"And have you lead 'em here? Suppose they followed you?"

Bebe began to sob. "I—I—they're after me. Two white men were following me from the bus stop. I think they were."

He started toward her. "You led them right here!"

"I was too scared, Andy! I wanted to be with you. I knew you wouldn't let 'em hurt me, honey."

"Hurt you?" He pushed the mouth of the shotgun toward her. He was screaming with rage now. "I ought to blow out——"

Her legs gave out and she started to sink to the floor slowly, back still against the wall. "Please! No! Please, no, baby!" She put both palms up toward him as though they could stop the burst of birdshot.

Graycroff came out of the kitchen where he'd been listening, carrying a Luger. "Knock off that shit, Andy," he said sharply. "Get to the windows. If anybody's following, we got to take the motherfuckers out before they get to the house."

Andy LeDuc stared at him with half-drunken confusion. Graycoff helped Bebe back onto her feet. "You're in it, now, you hear?" he told her. "You got to help. You ever fire a gun?"

She shook her head. Her immature features looked as though they were all huge brown eyes. The Shirley Temple curls jiggled in her fright.

Graycoff told LeDuc. "Get her a piece, you drunken ape. Quick." Then to Bebe he said, "You pull the trigger, that's all. Point it right at the gut and pull the fucking trigger. If they don't fall down, pull it again."

LeDuc pulled a .30-30 rifle from under the couch, took it to Graycoff. He snicked the safety off and handed it to Bebe. She didn't want to take it. It was a snake with fangs of fire and lead. Shrilly, she said: "I don't want to kill nobody. Please, don't make me do that."

"Shut your goddamn mouth and do as you're told," Graycoff said. "*You* want to get out of here alive, with us, you see anybody coming toward this house, you'd damn well better shoot."

She took the rifle in her trembling hands and he made a trip around all the windows. The ones facing north looked out onto an empty field that bordered on the new development. Anyone trying to gain entry to the house would hardly use that wide-open approach. Graycoff stationed Bebe, still sniffling but apparently resigned to her fate, at one of those windows. There was no back door, but the rear windows looked out onto a small yard backed up by a clump of woods. There was a door from the kitchen leading into the greenhouse, and Graycoff didn't worry about that too much. LeDuc was already at the front windows. Graycoff stationed himself at the rear ones.

It came to him that maybe the silly little bitch, Bebe, was tripping, that nobody had followed her, that she'd built the whole thing up in her mind, just as an excuse to come out here and rejoin Le-Duc. Who the fuck would the two white guys be? Maybe a couple of the dudes from whom they'd stolen the money? But what about the black man? Maybe some friend or relative of Bigger or Wickman or Yancey, out for revenge or a piece of the loot. They'd soon know, one way or another.

Shaft felt as though he was once again on patrol in the canebrakes of Nam, only this time unarmed and in broad daylight. In a way, it was worse. As it had been then, he knew it was coming but not exactly when nor from where. If he got past this lot, to the entrance drive to the house, he'd be all right. That meant they'd decided to wait for him there. There were only four or five more giant clumps of shrubbery lining the weed-overgrown sidewalk to go when it happened.

The thick, muscular arm went around his neck from behind in a typical mugger's stranglehold. The other man came at him from the front, an open jackknife with a six-inch blade in his hand. Instead of resisting the stranglehold, Shaft moved with it. He flung himself backward, raising both feet off the ground, flailing out at the frontal attacker. He felt the knife blade slash through his trouser leg and the burning pain of its point ripping at his calf at almost the same instant he felt the solid jolt of his shoe under the man's chin.

As he fell backward, taking the strangler with him, letting the other man bear the brunt of the heavy fall, he grabbed at a finger on the end of the

arm around his neck. He bent it backward with all his strength, heard the bone snap at the knuckle, heard the man scream. The arm around his neck loosened and Shaft somersaulted onto his feet. He saw the knifeman lying on his back a few feet away, the blade near his outstretched fingers. The man who had grabbed him from behind, raised his head, started to get up. His hat had fallen off. Shaft grabbed a handful of short, curly black hair, helped yank the man to his feet. Then he spun him around and Shaft drove the heel of his right hand up under the nostrils of his broad, previously broken nose. Hard. Splinters of bone and cartilage touched the man's brain and he died within seconds.

Shaft stepped over him. The man with the knife was still out cold, his eyes walled back, his mouth gaping, breathing shallowly. There was a still-swelling, blue-black welt under his meaty chin. Shaft kicked the jackknife clear across the street. Keeping one eye on the unconscious man, he then searched behind nearby bushes until he found the small suitcase and the attaché case. With the heel of his shoe, he smashed open the latches. The suitcase held a German submachine gun, gleamingly clean, oiled, and ready for action. In the attaché case was a Spanish automatic, large enough to be a forty-five. Shaft stuck the automatic into his belt and picked up the submachine gun, just as the man he'd heeled in the chin started to revive.

The man got up slowly, once almost falling again. He shook his head and looked toward his friend, staring unbelievingly.

"Over here," Shaft said softly.

The man turned and looked into the muzzle of

the machine gun. Shaft said: "You want me to cut you in half sideways or lengthwise? Put your fucking hands up and turn around."

Shaft went over to him and, with his finger on the trigger and the nose of the gun in the small of the man's back, frisked him. He was clean.

"We didn't know who you were," the man said. "We knew you were following us. We had to check you out. Nobody was going to kill you."

"No, huh? You nearly cut off my fucking leg." Slight exaggeration. He'd checked the wound. It was bleeding pretty good, but apparently no arteries had been cut, no muscles or tendons damaged. It smarted pretty good.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"You wouldn't recognize the name. What I want is a tall, skinny actor named Graycoff. Ever hear of him?"

"No. How come you were tailing LeDuc's chick?"

"What is this, a quiz show? I don't want to hear any more questions. Move your ass ahead of me until I tell you to stop." Shaft prodded his spine with the gun muzzle.

The man moved, hands still upraised. "Who's with LeDuc?" he persisted.

"Maybe a whole goddamned army. We'll find out."

Pausing at the stand of willow trees, Shaft said: "Walk into the front yard."

"Hey, for Christ's sake, I could get shot!"

"That's for sure right here if you don't move."

Shaft peered around a tree, the submachine gun at ready, as the man walked slowly toward the front veranda of the house, taking each step as though wearing cement socks. When he almost reached the front steps and nothing happened,

Shaft called softly: "That's far enough. Hold it. Stand right there." He stared past the Chevy parked in the driveway and saw the other small house in the back. He ran to the man in the yard, got behind him again, prodded him toward the driveway. Crouched behind the car, Shaft said: "Poke your head out around the car and shout to LeDuc to come out with his hands up."

"Are you crazy? You want me to get my head blown off?"

"I'm done arguing with you, man," Shaft said. "It's your head or your spine. Take your choice. The other guy might miss."

The man eased his face around the rear end of the Chevy and shouted toward the guesthouse. The front window of the house shattered and floated slowly outward, the *blam* of the shotgun sounding flat and unreal. Part of the shot picked starred holes in the car's windshield. Several pellets of lead caught the Mafia man in his left cheek. He ducked around the back of the car, holding the ragged wounds with his hands. Blood oozed from between his fingers.

"Jesus Christ, I'm shot! I'm shot!"

Shaft yanked his hand away so he could see the damage. "You didn't even lose an eye," he said.

He poked the end of the submachine gun around the back of the car and fired a short burst at the front of the house. Two more windows sharded inward and little pocks appeared in the white clapboard. There was no return fire.

Shaft looked around a thick stand of evergreens, curving here and parading down along the side of the long, glass greenhouse adjoining the guest cottage. He pushed the other man with the snout of the gun. "Get over behind those trees."

"What are you going to do?"

"Check out that greenhouse, see if there's a door at the other end. Move your ass."

Bent over like a quarterback on a sneak play, the man dodged from behind the car and into the trees. Shaft followed him and, sheltered, they reached the end of the greenhouse. There was a door, but it was fastened with a huge padlock. That was the end of Shaft's notion to try to sneak into the house through the greenhouse. He looked through a pane of glass. There was a door on the side of the house, at the far end but blowing off that lock would alert whoever was inside about what he was up to. He leaned against a big maple tree that stood near the firs, trying to figure it out.

He glanced upward. Some of the maple's stout limbs protruded out over the glass house. He pushed the gun into the other man's kidney. "You! Climb up this tree."

"What?" the man said, startled.

"Sonofabitch!" Shaft had had it. "Then *don't* do what I tell you to. You want to die right now? Is that what you want? Get up that tree."

The man reached up for a branch, planted his big feet against the bole, and pulled his big bulk up into the lower branches, casting fearful looks back toward the guesthouse.

"They can't see you, through all those leaves. Get up on that big branch to your left and crawl out on it as far as you can."

He saw Shaft raise the muzzle of the gun and continued scrabbling up into the tree to the big limb and began to crawl awkwardly along it. When he was halfway out over the glass roof of the greenhouse, Shaft pulled the trigger. The gun made

its deadly stutter. A dozen holes chewed into the limb and it snapped. The mobster shrieked, arched up into a standing position on the limb, hands thrown upward, thick fingers splayed. He toppled into a graceful swan dive—and crashed through the roof of the greenhouse. A thousand bottles seemed to shatter; all the glass in the world went flying.

Inside the guesthouse, Graycoff said: "Jesus God, what the fuck was *that?*"

Seconds later Shaft's gun stammered again, shooting out practically all the glass on his side of the greenhouse. Graycoff ran to the door that led out of the kitchen and into the greenhouse. He slid back the bolt and kicked open the door, standing to one side, his hands tight on the Garand rifle he was holding. Then carefully, he peered around the jamb. The whole floor of the greenhouse was a ruck of shattered glass. Three quarters of the way down, a big hulk sprawled face down, shards and splinters of glass protruding from parts of his body like bloody icicles.

Graycoff slammed the door shut again, bolted it. He shook his head, bewildered. Where had the mother come from? Had he fallen out of the sky? He began to feel as though a cold wet wind was blowing directly down his throat. A crazy yoyo out there with a machine gun, dumdums falling through the roof of a glass house. The whole world outside of this little house was going mad. And that fuck-up, LeDuc, gargling booze while the whole thing was going on, pretty soon he wouldn't be able to see well enough to hit an elephant two feet away.

Graycoff ran back to his post at a rear window.

Something moved the bushes at the back of the yard. He poked the nose of the Garand through the glass and pumped out two shots. Nothing happened.

When the rifle fired through a back window, Shaft dived backward into the shrubbery and crawled a few feet to a small clearing. He looked ruefully at the small sprout of torn cloth in the shoulder of his jacket. So he'd get a new suit. The pants were shot, anyhow. Shaft hadn't even been visible, he was sure. Well, the big broken-glass diversion hadn't worked too well. What next? He didn't want to shoot out the whole inside of the house if he didn't have to. He'd rather have Graycoff alive, so Anderozzi could sweat the whole story out of him. Otherwise, some wisenheimer might decide he was just a set-up to get Buford off the hook.

Shaft suddenly thought about the car. He'd have to go back through the bushes, around the greenhouse again, slink through the shelter of the trees to the driveway. Chances were the keys weren't in the jalopy, so he'd probably have to jump the wires. From behind a tree, he fired a quick burst toward the house, making sure no slugs poured through the windows. He had no idea which window Graycoff would be guarding. Under cover of that fusillade, he ran to the Chevy, swung open the door, and slithered on his belly along the front seat, his head under the steering wheel. He could hardly believe his eyes; the key was in the ignition. That saved a few moments that might mean everything.

He turned the key, reached down his right hand, and pushed down the gas pedal. The motor hawked a few times and then came alive, spurting black smoke from the exhaust. Shaft put the gearshift

into drive, released the emergency. His other hand jammed down on the accelerator and he felt the car lurch forward.

When he heard the sound of the car motor starting up, Andy LeDuc moved back to the window from where he had dodged during the machine-gun fire. He looked out and cursed the booze. The fucking car seemed to be heading right *at* him. All by itself. Nobody was driving. He stood, swaying a little, paralyzed with shock. It couldn't be. It wasn't happening. Half a second before the grillwork of the Chevy ripped full speed into the clapboard side of the old guesthouse, LeDuc flung himself to one side. The wall tore open with a screeching of splintered timber, the crunching of broken plaster, the groan and snap of laths, and the old car made its entrance. Halfway inside, just past the car door, it stalled. Shaft slithered out, holding the machine gun.

He saw a tall, bony black man at the back window, facing him now, leveling the Garand. Graycoff. He triggered the stutter gun, aiming low. The bullets almost cut Graycoff's legs off just above the knees. He pitched forward, flinging the Garand away just as his finger squeezed the trigger. Shaft heard a woman's scream and turned to see Bebe trying to futilely pluck the piece of lead from the Garand out of the ugly black hole under her left eye, just before she collapsed.

Shaft ducked behind the hood of the Chevy as Andy LeDuc, cursing, winged a load of birdshot at him. It made a mess out of an amateurish painting of springtime in Vermont.

Now I've got the sonofabitch, Shaft told himself and started toward LeDuc. The single-barreled

shotgun was finished. But the rifle LeDuc picked up off the floor wasn't. A blast from it nearly took Shaft's head off. He went back behind the car, raised the machine gun over the top of the hood, just as LeDuc scuttled drunkenly out into the kitchen, pulled the kitchen table over onto its side, and squirmed behind it.

Shaft ran to the kitchen door. He aimed the machine gun at the top of the table facing him. He said: "Throw out the rifle and you'll walk out of here with me."

There was no answer. Then the barrel of the rifle poked around the edge of the tabletop. Shaft's forefinger tightened. The whole table danced on the linoleum floor. At least two dozen holes made a crazy-quilt design in it. LeDuc's rifle fell to the floor. Shaft waited, ready to fire again. He was sucking wind himself, as tight as he could be wound.

Then Andy LeDuc crawled out from behind the table. There were three or four holes in the bloody mess of his shirt. But the man continued to crawl on hands and knees, looking straight at Shaft but unseeing, toward the kitchen door. A terrible wheezing sound was coming from somewhere inside him.

"Oh, shit!" Shaft said, not believing. LeDuc should have been dead a hundred times over. He stepped out of the way, watching with horrified fascination as LeDuc crawled through the doorway and past him, leaving smears of blood in his path. He turned toward a corner of the living room. Once he fell forward on his face and then pulled himself back up onto hands and knees. He kept going, more and more slowly but going.

He reached a corner of the room, managed to

scrape up a corner of the carpet before the words came out of his mouth in a scarlet spray: "All the fuckin' money!" He slumped down. And he didn't move again.

Shaft looked around. Were there more? There couldn't be. There was no place in this bloody shambles to hide. He pulled the carpet back the rest of the way, pulled up the loose floorboards, and saw the suitcase hidden there. He lifted one end of it. It was full. Full of pain, full of death. It was what this whole crazy mess was about. How many dead? Maybe not quite all of them—if Graycoff lived.

He ran over to him, ripped off the tall, bony man's shirt, and with strips of it made tourniquets, which he applied around Graycoff's skinny thighs, above the bullet wounds. It took a few minutes more for Shaft to use a kitchen towel to wipe his fingerprints off of the machine gun and the parts of the Chevy he had touched. Then he got out of there.

Maybe here in Yonkers he could find a telephone that worked. His leg hurt. It hurt a lot and it made him angry. Except he was too tired to do anything except call a cop with an anonymous tip.

The stitches in his leg itched like a row of fresh spider bites. The suit looked like it had been sent to World War II for cleaning and mending. The August murk lay in wait on the windowsills of the small Jane Street apartment—waiting for one light to go on, one more generator to burn out, one more power failure . . . and Shaft's air conditioner to go off.

Anderozzi had left half a gin and tonic in a glass that was making water rings on the table. It was

all tied up, of course. Graycoff would be a hundred years digging himself out from under the multiple murder-robbery charges. . . .

Ring. Fuck the phone. He pulled on a pair of beige tropical slacks, buckled the cloth belt. Ring. Fuck everybody in New York who owned a phone. Ring.

"What?"

"What about my wife?"

"She ain't here. Good-bye."

"Wait a minute. This is Claude Phillips. I gave you two hundred dollars as a retainer to——"

"Oh, *that* wife. Yeah, well, I got a report coming to you in a day or two, Mr. Phillips. Some things came up that——"

"Some things! What things! What kind of a detective are you, anyhow?"

"A tired one," he said, hanging up. But it was a good question and he thought about it for maybe two minutes. Maybe a minute and a half.

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